'MOTHERHOOD', 'THE FAMILY' AND *MURPHY BROWN*:
NEW ZEALANDERS' RECEPTIONS OF AN AMERICAN SITCOM TEXT

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ABSTRACT

This interdisciplinary study examines the role of American entertainment television in the social construction of 'motherhood' and 'the family' in New Zealand. It investigates how differently positioned viewers made sense of, and responded to, a particularly controversial episode of the American sitcom *Murphy Brown.* It also assesses the extent to which this programme was able to 'set the agenda' for discursive understandings of 'motherhood' and 'the family' in contemporary New Zealand society.

Drawing on various insights derived from poststructuralist theory and audience reception studies, the first aspect of this tri-partite investigation examines the macro context of this episode's production in the United States in 1992, and identifies competing constructions of 'motherhood' and 'the family' circulating within that wider environment. The representation of these debates within the text itself is then assessed through an analysis of its narrative structure and discursive content. The second aspect of this project outlines the macro context in which this episode was broadcast in New Zealand, and identifies competing understandings of 'motherhood' and 'the family' in this country. The third aspect comprises a reception analysis in which in-depth individual interviews were used to explore participants' interpretations of this American sitcom text and their responses to its propositional content around 'motherhood', 'the family' and *Murphy Brown.* Twenty-two adults from a range of backgrounds participated in this qualitative audience research.

On the basis of this research, it is argued that this particular American television programme and viewers in this country both play an active part in defining the social meaning of 'motherhood' and 'the family' in contemporary New Zealand. While such texts clearly work to establish certain parameters for audience receptions of their content, both cultural location and social group membership(s) provide New Zealand viewers with access to experiences, knowledges and discourses of the wider social world that potentially enable them to renegotiate and even reject the privileged meanings of American entertainment programming.

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CONTENTS

TABLES AND FIGURES

ABBREVIATIONS

BCCCS	Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies
CCC	Coalition of Concern Citizens
CYPFS	Children, Young Persons and their Families Service
DPB	Domestic Purposes Benefit
EEO	Equal Employment Opportunity
ERA	Equal Rights Amendment
GUMG	Glasgow University Media Group
IAV	Institute for American Values
NZH	New Zealand Herald
NZL	New Zealand Listener
NZWW	New Zealand Woman's Weekly
SGMS	Social Group Membership(s)
SPUC	Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child
WFL	Women For Life
WT	Waikato Times

I

Introduction

The research presented in this thesis explores the role of American entertainment television in discursive struggles around 'motherhood' and 'the family' in New Zealand today. It does so via an in-depth examination of New Zealanders' receptions of a somewhat remarkable episode of the American television situation comedy, *Murphy Brown*: one that not only grapples with these important contemporary debates, but which is also a *foreign* production; one clearly intended to entertain, yet also politically inflected. Various sites of scholarly interest thus converge in the present study.

First among these is the social construction of 'motherhood' and 'the family'. This study is grounded in the belief that it is important to understand how these related 'objects of discourse' are conceived, practised, and reproduced. Such questions have been of central concern to feminist thinkers, writers and activists associated with the 'second-wave' of the women's liberation movement, including Simone de Beauvoir (1957), Juliet Mitchell (1971), Adrienne Rich (1977), Nancy Chodorow (1978) and Shulamith Firestone (1979).[1] While adopting very different perspectives, these theorists commonly viewed motherhood (as traditionally conceived) as a patriarchal institution that prevented women from assuming full corporeal autonomy and self-definition, and served to continually reproduce the sexual division of labour. And while their various viewpoints subsequently met with intensive critique, the passion of their rhetoric fuelled feminist agitation here and overseas for a host of social reforms during the late 1960s and 1970s, including safe and free contraception, abortion on demand, equal opportunities for women, and free childcare available twenty-four hours a day. Some of these social reforms have been only partially implemented here in New Zealand, while others have been achieved but subsequently repealed (Guy & Jones, 1992; Coney, 1993).

In drawing attention to this matter, it is not my intention to evaluate the success (or otherwise) of feminist initiatives relating to reproduction and early childcare. Rather, I seek to demonstrate the relationship between discourse and social and political activism, and to thereby introduce the idea that the discursive realm has a significant and indeed *formative* bearing on the nature of the material conditions experienced by men and women in the course of their everyday lives. The present investigation is premised upon this understanding of the constitutive nature of language and

discourse. It is also actuated by my observation of two areas of congruency between the material and the discursive that have emerged in New Zealand in recent times. The first is that at a time of relatively high unemployment and a high rate of labour force participation by mothers of young children,[2] concerns have increasingly been raised, largely through the media, about children left 'home alone', the dangers of childcare centres, the declining rate of breastfeeding, and the need to give children the 'best possible start' in life.[3] Very similar concerns have been raised in the United States, with somewhat troubling repercussions for working mothers, as Thurer notes:

> Just when some of us have been teased into believing that we have vocational options; just when we assumed we could share the burden of child raising; just when we have been driven by economic necessity to work outside the home and to jury-rig a child-care plan, we have a mythology that insists, with rising shrillness, on perfection in child care. (Thurer, 1995, p. xxvii)

The second is that at a time when the number of single mothers is high and still rising (Department of Statistics, 1991a), concerns are being raised about the effects on children of 'growing up without dad' (Ansley, Stirling & Cohen, 1997). Indeed, addressing the problem of "fatherless families" is an explicit agenda of the new Shipley-led Government (TVOne *Network News* 9.12.97). If language and discourse are understood as having a constructive impetus, then it seems important to consider what it means to observe that, at a time when many women have apparently 'abandoned' their traditional place within the home and are raising their children outside the confines of the patriarchal nuclear family in greater numbers than ever before, the rights and interests of children and the negative social effects of solo motherhood have become objects of discourse. Now, perhaps more than ever before, it seems important to understand the terrain of this discursive warfare, and to understand how these highly significant social changes are being negotiated within the public and private spheres.

Given that these negotiations frequently occur within and through the media, and more particularly television, it is particularly important to understand television's role in this on-going process of cultural debate. Another site of scholarly interest therefore concerns the role played by television in the social construction of 'motherhood' and 'the family' in New Zealand today. As a cultural form, television has, in little over half a century, become an immense and ubiquitous institution, one that now infiltrates almost every facet of public and private existence (Ang, 1991a). It thus has considerable social and political significance in its own right. In this study, however, my interest lies in television's role in providing a forum for the

articulation and cultural negotiation of contemporary meanings around 'motherhood' and 'the family'. This interest stems from a theoretical understanding of the media as a key site for, and active participant in, a wider cultural process whereby 'the meaning of things' is continually subject to reproduction, contestation and change.

More particularly again, this study is concerned with the cultural significance of mainstream *American entertainment television* in reproducing, contesting, and potentially altering, contemporary meanings around 'motherhood' and 'the family'. While such programming is commonly perceived as offering 'innocent' and at times somewhat mindless entertainment, I follow Morley (1980b) in suggesting that there is no such thing as an 'innocent' television programme, since all contain explicit and at times implicit messages about human society. Like Turner (1994, p. 103), I submit that mainstream American film and television in particular provides "the *lingua franca* of story and fantasy for at least the English-speaking western world". Following Lyotard (1984), I also propose that the narratives of such popular fictions can be influential in terms of persuading viewers to see particular situations and ideas in particular ways - as 'true' or 'false', as acceptable or unacceptable, as 'progressive' or 'old-fashioned'. Such fictions therefore "help to define our sense of ourselves, shaping our desires, fantasies, imagined pasts, and projected futures" (Bennett and Martin, 1995, p. viii). For this reason, it is argued that

> An understanding of such fictions - of how they are produced and circulated, organised and received - is...central to an understanding of ourselves; of how those selves have been shaped and of how they might be changed. (Ibid.)

This study also reflects a scholarly interest in the way in which American television fiction is received by viewers here in New Zealand, an interest that warrants some further explanation. Concerns have long been expressed about the numerical dominance of American television fiction within New Zealand broadcasting schedules, a dominance that has emerged largely as a consequence of the small-scale nature of the local television industry (Lealand, 1988). In order to fill the (quite considerable) screen-time available, schedulers in this country have come to rely rather heavily on foreign programming, the vast majority of which is American. According to findings reported by Conway (1996), the screening of American television programmes in New Zealand has increased by forty percent in the past decade. While four out of ten programmes were of American origin in 1985, this ratio had increased substantially to almost *six* out of ten by 1996.

In some quarters these sorts of figures are cause for considerable anxiety, since they are regarded as further evidence of the extent of American 'cultural imperialism' in this country. As discussed in chapter V, the pervasive presence of 'Americana' in New Zealand has at times been held to undermine our 'authentic' local identity and culture while promoting American values and interests (Lealand, 1994; Bell, 1995), although there remains a dearth of empirical evidence documenting such an effect. The significance of the 'dominance' of American television programming on our screens is similarly under-researched, as is the possible impact of these programmes on local viewers. The present study thus also aims to begin the process of rectifying these substantial gaps in our knowledge of New Zealanders' receptions of American television, along with its possible role in discursive struggles around 'motherhood' and 'the family' in this country.

Of course this begs the question, why examine New Zealanders' negotiations of these issues in relation to an *American* programme broadcast here, as opposed to the locally produced content that dominates the audience *ratings*, and on these grounds alone could be held to render any American input into such debates largely redundant? In response, I would argue that the meanings of 'motherhood' and 'the family' in this country are not, and never have been, constructed in isolation. Discourses in local circulation are often very strongly inflected by foreign cultural productions. Any discussion of post-war childrearing practices in New Zealand, for example, would be incomplete without noting the extraordinary influence of the American paediatrician Dr Spock, whose classic manual *The Commonsense Book of Baby and Childcare* (1947) continued to be the standard source of advice for most New Zealand mothers regarding their maternal role and practice as late as the mid-1970s (Kedgley, 1996). Like the British doctor John Bowlby, another highly influential 'foreign expert', Spock explicitly warned of the dangers of maternal separation and advised women against seeking any form of employment outside the home. Both have had a major influence on the way in which motherhood is understood and practised in this country - far more so than local authorities of their era. On these grounds, it is argued that while the form and substance of contemporary debates around 'motherhood' and 'the family' are specific to this place and time, and while they exhibit many elements that are culturally and nationally specific, these debates also draw on a myriad of overseas influences, perhaps reflecting New Zealand's status as a small and relatively new nation in an increasingly globalised environment.

Having decided on these grounds to investigate the role of American entertainment television in the social construction of 'motherhood' and 'the family' in New

Zealand, the genre of situation comedy or 'sitcom' seemed to present the most appropriate object of focus for a number of reasons. Sitcoms remain the principal American contribution to the most *watched* television in New Zealand,[4] the more popular of which screen during prime-time viewing hours, and regularly receive high audience ratings (Lealand, 1988).[5] The thematic content of sitcoms is also particularly relevant to the present study. Whether the sitcom is based in the home or workplace, the interpersonal relationships of group members and the issues and problems they confront in their daily lives are central motifs. Issues of love and loyalty within the 'family' unit are frequently addressed, as are various contemporary social issues such as racial and sexual discrimination, teenage sexuality, single and working motherhood, and modern gender roles.

Furthermore, as Berman (1987) suggests, sitcom narratives often provide examples of how these problems can (and indeed, *should)* be talked about. In the course of narrativising these and other social issues, sitcoms can thus be regarded as active participants in defining those issues and in delimiting what it is possible to say about them. In effect, sitcoms can be seen as 'setting the agenda' for public and private considerations of these and other contemporary debates, and as providing a forum for the discursive negotiation of issues such as 'motherhood' and 'the family'. For this reason, it is argued that the content of television sitcom should not be so quickly trivialised and dismissed as 'meaningless light entertainment', as it often is by viewers and commentators alike. One dissenter from this common stance put it this way:

> Politicians anxiously read current affairs scripts for broadcasting transgressions and explicit attacks on their doings. They could find it more profitable to look at the implicit values underlying variety or comedy, soap opera or satire shows. What we believe or doubt, what we think honest or false, what moves us to action and leaves us passive is all there in the jokes, the banter and the way light entertainment treats human frailty. (British Broadcasting Research Unit, 1989, p. 18)

The selection of a text from the genre of sitcom as the focal point of the present study is thus intended to debunk the assumption that fictional programming comprises nothing more than pleasurable entertainment, and hence plays little or no part in the social construction of significant contemporary issues such as 'motherhood' and 'the family'. In this thesis, I take the view that whether one regards a particular comedy series as nauseatingly saccharine or sharply satirical, sitcom itself remains a significant cultural form. I therefore take the position that

much is at stake in the way television sitcoms depict particular situations, activities, values and discourses, and maintain that such depictions have the potential to either thwart or facilitate the process of social change.

A case in point, and one that is obviously relevant to the present study, is the American sitcom, *Murphy Brown.* Based around a metropolitan television news room and the daily lives and conflicts of those working there, the 1991/92 season largely focused on the unintended pregnancy of its (divorced) title character, Murphy, who eventually gave birth to a nine pound seven ounce son in the season finale. Thurer remarks on the transformative potential of such a depiction within mainstream television:

> On the night in 1992 when Murphy Brown became an unwed mother, she gave birth to more than a baby.... Her defiant act liberated women from the tyranny of mainstream domestic expectations, expectations that had long ceased to reflect reality, given the number of single mothers in this country.... Brown's insouciant motherhood has signalled a sea change in the unconscious sexism that once pervaded everyday life. She has forged new ways for women to mother. (Thurer, 1995, p. 297)

While the 'liberating' effect of this representation remains to be empirically demonstrated, Thurer's rather optimistic reading does articulate the extent to which this series broke 'new ground' in its positive depiction of Murphy's impending status as an unmarried mother. While other television sitcoms have depicted the struggles and successes of separated, divorced and widowed mothers (including Julia Baker, Ann Romano, Kate McArdle and Grace Kelly), Murphy is the first female sitcom *star* to give birth outside of marriage and the patriarchal nuclear family. As an unmarried, professional woman who chose to keep her illegitimate child and keep working while entrusting her new-born infant to the ministrations of a nanny, Murphy's particular brand of mothering was duty bound to raise some hackles in the on-going debate around 'motherhood' and 'the family'.

Indeed, the American broadcast of this season finale was immediately cited by the then vice president, Dan Quayle, as an example of Hollywood's 'poverty of values'. Quayle's political attack on Murphy Brown's status as a solo mother sparking a prolonged and heated discussion in the United States, and was subsequently incorporated into the narrative of the following season's premiere entitled *Murphy's Revenge*,[6] around which the present study is organised. By making numerous references to Quayle's remarks and media and public reaction to them, this episode

constitutes an interesting example of an emerging trend within the genre of sitcom for fiction to be blended with reality, and comedy with politics.[7] While this series is not alone in doing so (*The Simpsons* perhaps offering some of the best examples, according to Waller, 1994), what renders this episode so unique, and so useful for my purposes here, is the fact that these 'intertextual' references draw very specifically on a contemporary American debate around 'motherhood' and 'the family'. For this reason, *Murphy's Revenge* presented an ideal opportunity to explore the role of American entertainment television in an on-going struggle to define these 'objects of discourse' here in New Zealand in the mid 1990s.

Finally, it is necessary to offer some brief discussion of the theoretical and methodological approach adopted in this study. The research presented here follows the lead of a relatively small number of audience reception studies informed by poststructuralist insights into language, discourse and subjectivity. Its conception thus reflects an understanding of 'the meaning of things' as socially constructed (as opposed to prescribed) when cultural texts are produced and read within specific contexts. While such an understanding implies the need to consider three related aspects of the communicative circuit, studies of the social significance of cultural productions such as television, film and popular literature have, until recently, been more typically framed in terms of a structuralist conception of meaning as inherent *within the text itself.*

The limitations of this perspective and the modes of analysis it tends to inform can be very usefully identified in relation to a specific example, one that is also highly relevant to the present study. Dow (1992 and 1995) discusses what she terms the 'co-option' of liberal feminism in *Murphy Brown*. Briefly, she draws on hegemonic theory in suggesting that this co-option serves to reaffirm patriarchal definitions of femininity and feminism and reiterate the perceived incompatibility between the public and private spheres. According to Dow, this incompatibility is personified in the title character of Murphy Brown, who is comically scapegoated for having renounced those qualities appropriate to the 'feminine' sphere (domesticity and interpersonal skills) in favour of the norms and values of patriarchy, which are evident in her competitiveness, egotism and insensitivity. In short, Dow argues that Murphy "enacts a patriarchal interpretation of the excesses of liberal feminist ideology" (Dow, 1992, p. 143), and claims that her status as comic scapegoat secures the *ideological effects* of containing the threat posed by feminism for the dominant patriarchal order, naturalising patriarchal conceptions of appropriate gender behaviour, and making gender transgressions appear unappealing (Dow, 1992 and 1995).

When I first encountered this particular reading of *Murphy Brown*, it seemed to me to embody all that is inherently problematic in the structuralist paradigm as it has been appropriated for Cultural Studies, and to emphasise the strengths of a poststructuralist framework. Like many others working within the structuralist paradigm, Dow assumes that the meaning and ideological effect of *Murphy Brown* are encoded somewhere within its interior framework and hence can be determined through an entirely internal (hegemonic) analysis. Since, from this perspective, the text *itself* ultimately guarantees its meaning and ideological effectivity, Dow apparently perceives no need to substantiate her claim that *Murphy Brown* 'contains' the feminist challenge to patriarchal relations by making reference to the wider context of this text's production, nor by presenting any empirical evidence of such containment at the point of reception. Neither are considered necessary to validate her argument, since such an effect is textually pre-determined and hence self-evident. Similarly, her assertion that this series reaffirms patriarchal definitions of femininity and makes gender transgressions unappealing evidently requires no attempt to specify *for whom* these definitions are reaffirmed, and *to whom* Murphy's behaviour appears unattractive. Dow's analysis simply takes it for granted that these 'ideological effects' are exerted upon a basically passive and receptive viewing audience.[8]

While rejecting this position, I am struck by the fact that in some respects, Dow's basic intent is not dissimilar to my own. Whereas I seek to understand the role of *Murphy Brown* in a wider cultural process whereby the meanings of 'motherhood' and 'the family' are continually reproduced, challenged and changed, I perceive Dow as attempting to discern the role of this series in relation to the social negotiation (and in her view, *containment*) of meanings around 'femininity' and 'feminism'. Where we diverge most dramatically is in our theoretical perspective and more importantly, our chosen methods of exploration. Whereas Dow evidently considers her own hegemonic reading sufficient to reveal the ideological effectivity of *Murphy Brown*, I would argue that it is simply not possible to discern the social significance of cultural productions by merely examining the texts themselves through the lens of one's particular theoretical perspective. The role of specific media productions in wider cultural processes of meaning construction cannot, in other words, be determined without considering also the contexts within which those texts are produced and later read, along with the way in which they are received and understood by differently positioned audience members.

For this reason, the present study attempts to bridge two scholarly traditions that might, at first glance, seem somewhat disparate. As discussed in chapter II, this

project is grounded in a poststructuralist framework that emphasises the constructive power of language and discourse. Equally central to its conceptualisation are recent developments within Cultural Studies regarding the nature and process of audience negotiations of media texts. What ties these two strands together for my present purposes is the notion of *discursive struggle.* This notion is pivotal to the present tripartite investigation and informs the conceptualisation, examination and analysis of meaning production within the text itself, the macro contexts of its production and reception, and at the micro level of individual interpretation and response. While this approach draws on the tripartite model of mass communication research outlined by Thompson (1990), my use of this framework differs slightly from that proposed by its original architect and hence some further discussion is warranted at this point.

Thompson (1990) suggests that an adequate model of mass communication research needs to investigate and account for the operation of three related aspects or loci of meaning production. These are, firstly, "the *production and transmission or diffusion* of symbolic forms"; secondly, "the *construction* of the media message"; and thirdly, "the *reception and appropriation* of media messages" (Thompson, 1990, p. 304). While I generally follow Thompson's lead in respect of the latter two aspects, I find his quite specific emphasis on what I would term the *micro* context of textual production and transmission - "the production and transmission or diffusion" (Ibid.) of media texts - somewhat limited. Such a narrow focus is, I maintain, likely to come at the expense of paying due attention to the *macro* social, political, economic and discursive field within which the (micro) institutional context of production is itself situated.

In my view, the construction of media messages is informed by the wider social, political, economic and discursive field at least as much as it is informed by the more immediate environment of a particular media institution and the social relations of a particular production studio. A similar point is made in relation to the reception and appropriation of media messages, which is likewise situated within a broader macro context - that of the social, political, economic and discursive field within which viewing takes place. Like media texts, audience interpretations and responses cannot be fully apprehended in abstraction from this wider context. Thus in this study, text, (macro) context and interpretation are conceived as closely related and interactive elements of the mass communication process as a whole. Each aspect is considered significant in its own right, yet is also held to inform and indeed shift the meaning potential of the others.

In these terms, while the macro context of textual production is understood as delimiting the discourses drawn on in its construction, the text itself is viewed as actively reproducing discursive understandings around 'motherhood' and 'the family' within that wider context. Similarly, while the text attempts to establish certain parameters for audience receptions of it, the macro context of reception and the discourses viewers bring to their encounter with that text work to interrupt that process by providing alternative discursive frameworks of interpretation. For this reason, it is necessary to examine each aspect of mass communication in its specificity, and *also* in association with the other aspects of communication to which it is inextricably linked.

In keeping with this revised tripartite framework, chapters III and IV examine competing constructions around 'motherhood' and 'the family' within each discursive site in greater detail. Chapter III outlines the wider social, political, economic, and cultural context within which *Murphy's Revenge* was conceptualised in the United States in 1992, and charts the different 'modes of talking' about 'motherhood' and 'the family' potentially accessible at that time to the American writers and producers of *Murphy Brown*. This chapter then presents an analysis of *Murphy's Revenge* in terms of its narrative structure and discursive content, paying particular attention to the way in which discourses of the wider social world are articulated and juxtaposed within it for the purpose of generating humour. The way in which one particular discourse comes to be privileged by the structure and content of this American sitcom narrative is also identified in this chapter.

Understanding this process comprises an essential precursor to comprehending the ability of this particular episode to 'set the agenda' for New Zealanders' receptions and hence play some role in the social construction of 'motherhood' and 'the family' within this different national context. Equally essential, I would argue, is some degree of insight into the different, and equally specific, macro context of this episode's reception by the New Zealand participants in this study in the mid 1990s. Chapter IV consequently presents an overview of this wider economic, political, social and cultural context of reception. It also identifies the predominant discourses circulating within that context and hence potentially accessible to participants at the time of their encounter with this American sitcom text.

Alongside this acknowledgement of the importance of the text itself and the contexts of its production and reception, it is argued that in order to understand the role played by American entertainment television in the social construction of 'motherhood' and 'the family' in New Zealand, it is necessary to examine how such

programmes are received and their content negotiated by viewers in this country. Chapter V thus critically reviews those studies of audience reception that are immediately relevant to the issues addressed in this investigation. These issues include the power of this episode to 'set the agenda' for viewer interpretation and response, the role of demographic and social group memberships in differentiating audience receptions, the significance of cultural location in shaping the encounter between 'foreign' texts and local viewers, and the various modes of reception that may be adopted by viewers in making sense of television programming. Each of these issues, it is argued, impinges on the actual and potential role of American entertainment television in discursive struggles around 'motherhood' and 'the family' in this country.

Chapter VI then examines how viewers located within this (different) national and cultural location received and made sense of *Murphy's Revenge*, broadcast in this country under the different name of *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* - the first of numerous cross-cultural shifts in the meaning potential of this American sitcom text. This chapter considers New Zealanders' receptions of the form of this text as an American production in the genre of sitcom. It then examines the tension between their respective experiences of 'familiarity and estrangement' in relation to this episode's narrative content, which inevitably draws on and refers to the wider context of its production in the United States in 1992. Acknowledging the significance of the contextual shift between this episode's production and its reception here in New Zealand in 1995, chapter VI finally identifies some of the *strategies* for sense production employed by these cross-cultural viewers during their encounter with this 'foreign' television text.

Chapter VII subsequently addresses the relationship between participants' adoption of particular modes of reception and their cultural location, social group membership(s), and access to discourses of the wider social world. Three key sites of meaning production are considered, these being participants' respective capacities to *identify* with Murphy as the central narrative protagonist, their receptions of this episode's depiction of Murphy as a mother its propositional content around 'motherhood' more generally, and their responses to its liberal-humanist affirmation of single parent families and other alternative family structures. Each of these different aspects is considered in relation to the ability of *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* to 'set the agenda' for viewers' receptions and to define and delimit how these issues are conceived and talked about.

II

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Introduction

This chapter describes the theoretical and methodological framework underpinning this study. It firstly introduces those poststructuralist insights into the nature of language, discourse and subjectivity that have been most pivotal to its composition. Then, it locates the present study within that heterogeneous body of thought and research which addresses the social significance of media productions by way of examining audience receptions of them, highlighting recent developments within Cultural Studies for special consideration. These developments have been variously informed by poststructuralist theory, and have been particularly important in guiding the conceptualisation of the present project. So too has the notion of *discursive struggle*, which serves as a primary organising principle of this 'tri-partite' (Thompson, 1990) investigation into meaning production within a particular television programme, the macro contexts of its production and reception, and individual interpretations and receptions of it. The way in which each of these discursive sites has been theoretically conceived is then outlined, along with the specific methods employed in their investigation and the rationale for their use.

The (Post)Structuralist Paradigm

As discussed by Hawkes (1977), Sturrock (1979), Culler (1983), Weedon (1987) and Siedman (1994), poststructuralism constitutes a philosophical development grounded in the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure effectively rejected the notion that language transparently reflects and names objects in the 'real world', in favour of the view that all knowledge is constructed within language and discourse. While this recognition of meaning as socially constituted remains central to the poststructuralist vision, Saussure's model of language has been subject to an intensive critique. Much of this criticism centres on the notion that meaning is a *property* of language, which Saussure in turn conceived as an autonomous, closed and self-referential signifying system. In these terms, the meaning of any individual signifier was held to be singular and internally guaranteed by its relation to other signs within the signifying chain of which it formed part (Saussure, 1981). On this

basis, Saussure employed a methodological paradigm for the study of language known as *synchronic analysis*, a mode which conceived its object as "a system of pure values determined by nothing outside of the momentary state of its terms" (Weber, 1976, p. 930). He thus proceeded to deduce the shared social codes and conventions of language use through an entirely *internal* method of analysis.

Jacques Derrida's critique of the Saussurian paradigm was especially significant in defining the move from structuralism to poststructuralism. Briefly, Derrida (1976 and 1978) refutes Saussure's logocentric view of meaning on the grounds that it offers no way of explaining why the same signifier can convey different and even incompatible meanings within different contexts, nor why it is possible for those meanings to change over time (Weedon, 1987). In place of this notion, Derrida suggests that the use of language is always located within a particular *discourse,* and maintains that it is only within this specific discursive *context* that meanings can be temporarily and only retrospectively fixed, and also challenged and redefined (Ibid.). In these terms, since cultural texts are given meaning through a range of contradictory discourses, the meaning of even the most seemingly fixed signifiers is able to shift and change within different discursive systems (Ibid.).

In the wake of this reconceptualisation of language use as *discursive*, Michel Foucault (1971, 1972 and 1981) attempted to chart the operation and effectivity of a number of discourses, most notably those pertaining to sexuality and madness within the fields of science, psychiatry and medicine. While much of his work comprises detailed archaeologies[1] (and later, genealogies)[2] of these and various other 'objects of knowledge', Foucault simultaneously offers a theory of discourse, power and subjectivity which effectively underpins the analytical orientation of the present research and hence warrants some further discussion.

Briefly, Foucault describes discourses as socially and historically specific, changeable and competing ways of constructing knowledge about the natural and social worlds. Grounded in different assumptions about the nature of 'reality' and representing different values, beliefs and interests, discourses can be understood as multiple "regimes of truth" (Illouz, 1991, p. 233); as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). That is to say, discourses produce sets of themes, concepts and statements about specific objects and areas of human experience, such as *motherhood* and *family life*. In so doing, they define and also delimit how these are understood and talked about, and by whom (Foucault, 1981; Kress, 1985; Weedon, 1987).

In this view, therefore, discourses are somewhat more than 'just talk'. Not only do they produce specific kinds of knowledge about objects in the world and human experience of it, but they also inform a variety of related social practices and shape the nature of power relations within those practices (Weedon, 1987). They are manifested within human actions, social structures and institutions, and consequently underpin economic and political systems, educational practices, religious beliefs, health and welfare policies, and cultural and media representations (Foucault, 1981).[3] As multiple 'modes of talking', discourses permeate and circulate within particular social formations. While some are basically compatible and may even reinforce each other, others are essentially at odds and must struggle against each other to obtain status, power and to assert their particular knowledges and meanings (Schlesinger, Murdock & Elliot, 1983; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Radway, 1988).

Since Foucault does not attend more specifically to the operation of discourse within media representations, I have found it is necessary to supplement his work with that of Antonio Gramsci, an Italian neo-Marxist theoretician. Gramsci (1971 and 1985) tried to account for the effectivity of ideology within social democracies by suggesting that the exercise of social control was characterised by a *struggle* between broad-based and shifting social coalitions to win the active consent of subordinate groups to their moral, cultural, intellectual and political leadership or hegemony, and to yield to their control of strategic institutions with society.[4] According to Gramsci, the media play a key role in this process, and collectively comprise a modern-day battleground between opposing social forces. In this contested space, multiple and often incompatible elements from various dominant and alternative discourses are brought together and must compete for ascendancy (Gramsci, 1971). The attainment of hegemony is, however, never final or complete because 'resistance', dissent and contradiction are always present within the wider cultural sphere. Thus, the evolution of ideological consensus involves a continual and shifting process of struggle, contestation and change.

Like Gramsci, Foucault ascribes a relative power to discourses which resides in their different capacities to win people's consent to their particular 'regime of truth' or version of reality, along with the constraints on knowledge each represents. That is to say, discursive struggle does not take place on a level playing field, since these different discursive systems effectively bear different degrees of authority and influence. Some, particularly those which uphold the existing social order, are more prominent, while others are less so (Morley, 1980c). The dominant discourses are those which carry institutional backing and which successfully assert a particular set of concepts or practices as 'common sense' - as *the* natural and legitimate way of

thinking about things and acting in the world (Foucault, 1981 and 1986; Weedon, 1987; Fairclough, 1989).

Foucault also regards the 'taken-for-granted' nature of the dominant discourse as a necessary complement to economic and political leadership, since it works to secure people's consent to the dominant relations of an era (Fairclough, 1989). However, he offers a more far-reaching understanding of the implications of this relative power through his suggestion that since power is established, exercised, reproduced and challenged through language and discourse, control over discourse is a mechanism and factor in the maintenance of power. On this basis, Foucault suggests that "discourse is...the thing for which and by which there is struggle; discourse is the power which is to be seized" (Foucault, 1971, p. 221). Mindful of the contradictions that exist between and also within different discourses, Foucault suggests "we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies" (Foucault, 1981, p. 100-1). As this implies, Foucault's theory of discourse is grounded in the view that the frameworks and structures of culture are always 'in process' and mutable. From this perspective, even the most naturalised discourses are subject to challenge and change as different social groupings interact and struggle to impose their particular discursive meanings, a notion which again clearly resonates with Gramsci's notion of hegemonic struggle outlined above.

Foucault also ascribes discourses an active and constitutive role in relation to human subjectivity. He claims that discourses define and shape social, physical and psychological 'selves' in particular ways, in that by assuming a particular subject position within discourse, individuals gain access to a unique set of images, scripts and concepts through which they can construct their own identity or sense of self (Foucault, 1981; Fairclough, 1989; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Identity is thus considered an *effect* of discourse. In this view, social subjects are not the independent 'authors' of their enunciations, or even their own concept of themselves. Rather, they become positioned or subjectified in the very process of articulation[5] and their 'talk' similarly positions those they address.

Furthermore, while a dominant discourse may offer preferred forms of subjectivity, Foucault suggests that the inevitable presence of other discourses means that individuals are offered multiple, and often contradictory, discursive subject positions. These different subject positions imply different bodies, different modes of social behaviour, require different emotional, physical and intellectual capacities,

and convey different degrees of social power (Weedon, 1987). In this view, identity is inherently unstable and involves the somewhat precarious and on-going process of confirmation and reconstruction through the progressive or simultaneous occupation of particular discursive subject positions. Thus, an individual who has a certain social, political or religious allegiance at one moment may have a different, conflicting allegiance at another, and may consequently locate him or herself within various, and at times incompatible, discursive subject positions in the on-going process of self-construction (Ibid.). In these terms, social subjects and their bodies can be considered localised sites for a much wider process of discursive contestation and struggle, one which typically remains unresolved at the level of individual articulation. The relatively transient nature of this process is aptly described in Radway's discussion of "nomadic" subjectivity (Radway, 1988, p. 363).

Given their multiple and often shifting identity positionings, individuals are held to have access to a (limited) range of different discursive repertoires from which they can potentially draw in making sense of the world around them (Weedon, 1987). As active participants in a wider cultural process in which 'the meaning of things' is continually redefined and re-negotiated, individuals are seen to selectively draw on these different discursive elements, dipping into this pre-existing discursive pool to construct an account that appears to be 'uniquely' their 'own' - an entirely original response, viewpoint, version of events, or argument (Phillips, 1996). And while an individual's access to the entire pool of discursive elements that constitute this field is limited by his or her particular array of social group membership(s) (Coyle, 1995; Phillips, 1996), it is clear that such membership(s) do not *determine* the access of individuals to the wider discursive field in any straight forward way (Marshall & Raabe, 1993).[6]

Individual articulations are thus considered to be highly contradictory, since they inevitably contain the traces or fragments of the conflictual voices which constitute the wider discursive field. As identified by Parker (1989), Fairclough (1989) and Phillips (1996), this process of dipping in and out of competing discourses produces inconsistency and simultaneously generates the potential for change at the level of individual articulation. That is to say, as individual speakers 'mix and match' different discursive propositions and piece together their 'unique' utterances, hybrid discourses may begin to emerge (Parker, 1989). And it is by producing these hybrid discourses that individuals can actively and creatively participate in a much wider process of discursive (and hence social and cultural) change, although this potential is obviously limited by the range of discursive elements already in circulation within the wider context of individual articulation, as Phillips (1996) points out.

This notion of discursive contestation and struggle between different ways of constituting 'reality' and related modes of subjectivity is central to my understanding of the encounter between television programmes and their viewers. It effectively underpins the theoretical and methodological approach taken in this study, an approach which focuses somewhat less intently on the operations of discursive dominance and more on the implications of discursive plurality, or the presence of "warring forces of signification" (Roman, 1988, p. 22) within each of the sites investigated here. I want to suggest that any consideration of the role of television in wider cultural processes of meaning construction needs to acknowledge that both television texts and audience members are active participants in an on-going battle to define 'the meaning of things' which clearly exceeds them both. This understanding potentially offers a means of reconciling two quite disparate perspectives that have historically informed theory and research into the social significance of media productions more generally. The first position reflects a rather deterministic conception of media texts as extremely powerful and audience members as passively receptive of media messages. In contrast, the second reflects a construction of audience members as able to actively resist media messages and create their own uses and meanings of them. These two very different perspectives have vacillated in the extent of their influence over the formulation and conduct of research into, variously, media texts themselves, the macro and micro contexts of their production, and audience receptions of them. Since the present study attempts to follow a 'middle path' between these two positions, some further discussion of the contribution each has offered to an understanding of the media's social significance may be useful here.

From Media 'Effects' to 'Active' Audiences

Media effects research

Some of the earliest research in this area was conducted in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s, and sought to identify the effects of media content on audience members. Much of this early work aimed to reveal the influence on individuals of media depictions of violence, sex, and immorality, largely in response to a series of 'moral panics' concerning the potentially detrimental impact of newly developed mediums, such as film and the comic book (Jensen & Rosengren, 1990; Perry, 1996). Classic examples include the Payne Fund studies into the impact of motion pictures on American youth during this period, the findings of which prompted rigorous self-censorship within Hollywood up till the 1960s (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). Also influential was Hovland's *Experiments in Mass Communication*, which

examined the effects of persuasive media on American soldiers during World War II, and found evidence of the media's ability to change attitudes (Hovland, Lumsdaine & Sheffield, 1949; Perry, 1996).

These and other early studies tended to confirm a largely taken-for-granted construction of the media as extremely powerful and as exerting an immediate and measurable impact on audience members (Jensen & Rosengren, 1990; Newbold, 1995a). Underpinning these early investigations was a behaviourist or Pavlovian model of stimulus and response, and hence media effects were conceived as specific reactions to specific media output, or stimuli (McQuail & Windahl, 1993). In effect, these researchers perceived mass communication in terms of the 'hypodermic needle' or 'magic bullet' thesis, a problematic notion which implied that media content was directly impregnated into isolated audience members, who then responded in a highly consistent and predictable manner (Jensen & Rosengren, 1990). Not surprisingly, this notion has been intensively criticised for its failure to consider those factors which might potentially intervene in the 'transmission' of media messages, such as personality variables and the influence of social group membership(s) (McQuail & Windahl, 1993). Early effects research failed, in other words, to attend to the *social context* of media consumption. This tradition has also been denounced for proposing a rather simplistic and mechanistic view of mass communication which grossly over-exaggerates the extent of the media's omnipotence, while simultaneously neglecting to consider the actual nature of media messages (McQuail & Windahl, 1993; Nightingale, 1996; Perry, 1996).

Seeking to rectify at least some of these failings and reacting strongly against the deterministic assumptions of early effects research, later studies began to steer the study of media effects in a different direction. Some of the most influential work was spearheaded by Paul Lazarsfeld at the University of Columbia. Lazarsfeld examined the effect of media on political opinion and behaviour (Newbold, 1995a). Of particular note is *The People's Choice* (Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, 1948), which presented findings from a study of voting behaviour in Erie County, Ohio, during the American presidential election of 1940. Contrary to the results of early effects studies, these researchers discovered no direct media impact on voting or political opinion (McQuail & Windahl, 1993). Rather, media messages were found to *reinforce* people's existing political inclinations (Perry, 1996; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Lazarsfeld and his colleagues also found that opinion leaders were significantly more influential in shaping political opinion and voting behaviour than the mass media (Jensen & Rosengren, 1990; Perry, 1996). Proceeding from this new understanding, researchers such as Klapper (1960) hypothesised that different shared

proclivities would generate divergent understandings among different social groups (Corner, 1991).

The dual significance of this work lay first in its disruption of the notion that the media was all-powerful while audiences remained essentially passive, and secondly in its identification of a number of 'intervening variables', which were held to *mediate* between a message and its audience and to thus impinge on the media's effectiveness as an agent of attitudinal or behavioural change (Boyd-Barrett & Newbold, 1995). These 'limited effects' researchers argued that people's understandings of media content were influenced to a large extent by their *existing* predispositions, and furthermore that different shared proclivities would generate divergent understandings among different social groups (Corner, 1991). Klapper (1960), for instance, suggested that media use typically reinforces existing political beliefs. While sometimes causing minor attitude change, such use far less often results in conversion to a new position. Following this lead, the new effects researchers reconceived mass media as having input into a highly complex matrix of social relationships with which it had to compete to assert particular messages (McQuail & Windahl, 1993). They consequently began attending to factors such as the *context* of media consumption, the influence of peoples' interpersonal networks, the nature of the values and behaviours shared by different communities, and the role of 'opinion leaders' in shaping audience response (Newbold, 1995a).

While the 'mediated effects' model dominated the field of effects research from the late 1940s to the 1980s, work in this tradition has often been criticised for its relatively undiscriminating view of media content, along with its exaggerated conception of individual agency and political participation (McQuail & Windahl, 1993). Furthermore, by the late 1950s the popularity of effects research was itself in decline, largely due to this prevailing notion that media impact was limited and relatively harmless, and hence not so worthy of scholarly attention (Perry, 1996). This view changed, however, during the 1960s and 1970s, as public concern was again expressed about the possible social consequences of television in particular, which was by then a ubiquitous cultural form in the United States at least (Morgan & Signorielli, 1990; Newbold, 1995a). Anxiety centred around the increasing amount of violent imagery on television, sparking a renewed spurt of research and debate typified in reports such as *Television and Behaviour* (National Institute of Mental Health, 1982), which bought together evidence collected over ten years supporting a relationship between television viewing and aggression (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Rowland, 1997). While this more recent work resurrected a construction of the media as a powerful stimulus influencing people's behaviour, opinions and values

(McQuail & Windahl, 1993), its focus was somewhat different to that of the earlier effects studies, with Gerbner et al.'s work on 'media cultivation' being especially influential (Gerbner, Gross, Eleey, Jackson-Beeck, Jeffries-Fox, & Signorielli, 1977; Gerbner, Gross, Jackson-Beeck, Jeffries-Fox, & Signorielli, 1978; Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, Morgan, & Jackson-Beeck, 1979).

Whereas early effects researchers sought to identify the immediate, short-term effects of media use, Gerbner was primarily concerned with the long-term, cumulative impact of television depictions of gender, crime, and violence (Wober & Gunter, 1988; Jensen & Rosengren, 1990; Newbold, 1995a). Using content analysis, he identified the values inherent in television's symbolic environment and suggested that television exerts an effect by gradually cultivating and regulating people's beliefs in line with television's skewed depiction of reality, rather than the real thing (Wober & Gunter, 1988; McQuail & Windahl, 1993). For example, he found that people's views of gender roles were consistent with, and in fact based on, television's somewhat distorted construction of reality (Newbold, 1995a). Recent work has examined media cultivation in relation to such things as patterns of VCR use, pornography, and religious television (Dobrow, 1990; Hoover, 1990; Preston, 1990).

Like its predecessors, this phase of effects research has its share of dissenters (Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs & Roberts, 1978; Krattenmaker & Powe, 1978; Wober, 1978). Some have argued that the media cultivation framework is limited by a number of erroneous assumptions regarding the content of television and the nature of television viewing, while others have criticised its implicit conception of the television experience as basically undifferentiated and cumulative, on the grounds that this neglects the diversity of genres and messages that exists within the flow of broadcasting (Morgan & Signorielli, 1990). And finally, it remains difficult to reconcile the key premise of this framework - that television messages are powerful enough to exert a long-term, cumulative effect on viewers - with more recent theorising and research highlighting the extent to which audiences are active and creative participants in the construction of meaning (McQuail & Windahl, 1993).

Audience Uses and Gratifications

This understanding of audiences as active and creative is central to a second significant body of reception analysis which examines the uses and gratifications of media consumption. Again largely concentrated in the United States, the origins of uses and gratifications research lie in the descriptive work of Herzog during the early

1940s, which examined motivations for women's use of day-time radio soap operas and quiz programmes (Herzog, 1944). Like the 'second wave' of effects research (with which it has strong connections through Lazarsfeld's Bureau of Applied Social Research), uses and gratifications research initially constituted something of a reaction against the simple, direct effect, 'stimulus-response' model of mass communication and its implied media determinism (McQuail & Windahl, 1993).

In terms of this framework, individuals are constructed as the active, goal-oriented and selective consumers of media messages (Perry, 1996). They are held to use and interpret messages according to their personal interests, aims, values, psychological characteristics and preferences, and to have a range of motivations for seeking out media content, including relaxation, companionship, stimulation, vicarious interaction, entertainment, diversion, information seeking and emotional release (Klapper, 1960; Blumler & Katz, 1974; Livingstone, 1990; Rubin, 1993). In this view, people's needs and gratifications are conceived as *mediating* between media content and reception, a notion which clearly links this work with parallel studies of media effects conducted during the post-war period (Perry, 1996). Perhaps the most widely recognised text in this field is Blumler and Katz's edited collection, *The Uses of Mass Communication* (1974).

Among some of the more relevant criticisms of the uses and gratifications approach are that such research over-emphasises the activity of individual audience members, particularly in the face of evidence that at least some television viewing is relatively unselective (Barwise & Ehrenberg, 1988; Morley, 1992). This over-emphasis on the audience may explain other frequently cited problems with this research tradition, including its failure to attend to particular textual and cultural features of media *content* (McQuail & Windahl, 1993; Nightingale, 1996), and its lack of a sufficiently sociological perspective (Elliot, 1974; Morley, 1992; Newbold, 1995a). Finally, the uses and gratifications tradition has been rebuked for its implicit construction of media as non-partisan and perhaps even constructive tools for the gratification of people's social and psychological needs (Newbold, 1995a), a construction which effectively by-passes the need to examine the potentially negative impact of media on culture (Perry, 1996).

Developments Within Cultural Studies

Up until the early 1960s, debates concerning media effects and audience uses and gratifications largely dominated the field of mass communication theory and research. It was at this point, however, that British media theorists and researchers spearheaded a radical shift away from this 'Americanised' behaviourist tradition

(Morley, 1980c; Moores, 1990; Curran, 1996a). The object of their increasing attention was the relationship between mass media and cultural reproduction, with the early works of Hoggart (1957) and Williams (1958) being of particular significance in defining the newly-emerging field of Cultural Studies (Newbold, 1995b).

Underpinning these early studies was a Marxist (i.e. structuralist) interpretation of the media as "part of an ideological arena in which various class views are fought out, although within the context of the dominance of certain classes" (Curran & Gurevitch, 1977, p. 4-5). In these terms, the media were conceived collectively as a "major cultural and ideological force" (Morley, 1980c, p. 117) which effectively served to reproduce the dominant (Capitalist) relations through their use of language, symbolic and cultural codes of representation (Newbold, 1995b). That is to say, the "frames of reference", "conceptual categories" and construction of reality supplied by the media were held to reflect the dominant culture, and thus the media were conceived "either as offering a dominant ideological definition of reality that served dominant interests, or, in its stronger version, of misrepresenting what really happened in a way that promoted false consciousness" (Curran, 1996b, p. 258). Either way, the media were assumed to exert an ideological effect, and Cultural Studies scholars consequently turned their attention toward the implicit ideological labour of media texts and the wider cultural and economic context of their production.

Numerous strands of investigation subsequently emerged, including media sociology, political economy, *Screen* studies, ethnography, and what is sometimes termed reception analysis (Morley, 1991) or 'new' audience research (Curran, 1990 and 1996b). While the bulk of this work focuses on 'meaning production' (Moores, 1990), each of these strands concerns itself with a different moment in the process of meaning construction. Media sociologists such as Tunstall (1971) and Schlesinger (1978), for example, have been primarily concerned with the cultural and economic context of media production, and have investigated the operations and imperatives of media institutions and industries (Boyd-Barrett & Newbold, 1995). In contrast, the (almost exclusive) focus of *Screen* theory and analysis has been the text, while ethnographers, conversely, have concerned themselves with the wider social meaning and context of media consumption. In effect, these different streams represent a variety of responses to a shift that occurred within Cultural Studies itself in the wake of the poststructuralist turn. Of most immediate significance to the present study is the movement away from *text*-based analyses of media products and

subject identifications - best exemplified by *Screen* theory and analysis - towards various forms of *audience*-based investigations into media receptions.

Screen Theory

In keeping with Saussure's construction of language as an autonomous, closed and self-referential signifying system, scholars within this influential stream of thought conceived textual meaning as implicit within media productions themselves. They consequently attempted to reveal the codes and conventions of representation governing the semiosis of media texts through entirely *internal* modes of analysis (Young, 1981). Ideology was similarly held to be encoded into the structure of media texts, and was seen to exert a particular effect in terms of securing people's consent to, and hence reproducing, the dominant economic, political and social relations. Roland Barthes (1973), for example, made the highly influential claim that the narratives of classic and popular cultural texts worked to transmit and naturalise the dominant cultural values and bourgeois ideological imperatives of the era while suppressing alternatives. In light of this new understanding, many scholars turned their critical gaze toward the narrative codes of diverse cultural forms such as romance novels, women's magazines, popular music, fashion, television and perhaps most significantly, film, in a sincere attempt to 'expose' their underlying ideological meaning and effect (for example see Barthes, 1973; McRobbie, 1978; Fiske and Hartley, 1978).

This stress on the ideological 'effectivity' of cultural texts was particularly prominent among an influential group of British film theorists associated with the journal *Screen*, including Laura Mulvey (1975), Colin MacCabe (1976), and Stephen Heath (1977-8) (Moores, 1990). Drawing on the work of the French film theorist, Christian Metz (1975), along with insights derived from psychoanalysis, linguistics and neo-Marxist theory, these scholars constructed a coherent theory of the spectator-text relation which came to have major ramifications for future understandings of the audience (Morley, 1996). Particularly important in the development of this theory was Louis Althusser. Althusser (1971) argued that ideology works through State Apparatuses (such as the mass media and culture industries) to reproduce the submission of labour power to the existing capitalist relations of production. Ideology achieves this by way of *interpellating* or 'hailing' individual social beings as its subjects and inviting them to adopt particular subject positions within discourse. Drawing on this notion of interpellation, *Screen* analysts subsequently investigated the visual and narrative techniques used by film-makers to construct particular subject positions for the spectator and thereby organise audience responses in prescribed ways (Curran, 1996b).[7]

By the end of the 1970s, however, an intensive critique of *Screen* theory and analysis had been developed by members of the Media Group at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (BCCCS). Stuart Hall, Charlotte Brunsdon and David Morley in particular argued that the analytical project engaged in by *Screen* theorists presumed that a single ideological meaning and preferred subject position were encoded within the narrative and visual structure of film texts, and hence could be identified through close analysis. Both were similarly understood to be inevitably secured at the level of individual reception regardless of the context of any *particular* viewer's textual encounter, and to subsequently exert an ideological effect in terms of helping to reproduce the dominant social relations (Brunsdon & Morley, 1978; Hall, 1980a and 1980b; Morley, 1980b and 1980c; Brunsdon, 1983). As Hall and his contemporaries argued, however, these assumptions revealed a problematic conflation of 'dominant meanings' (encodings) with actual audience interpretations (decodings) (Brunsdon, 1983).

On the basis of these conjectures, *Screen* scholars evidently perceived no reason to investigate the actual meanings made by 'real' audience members, nor the actual subject positions adopted by them, since both were assumed to be determined and internally guaranteed by the text itself. Viewing was thus conceived as an essentially passive and non-critical activity which occurred in relative privacy and solitude, thereby re-invoking the problematic 'hypodermic-needle' theory of media effects. In these terms, viewers were reconstructed as 'cultural dopes' (Hall, 1986 and 1996) - as gullible, undiscerning and so lacking in critical judgement that they are lead to passively ingest the intended meaning and ideological content of media messages in unaltered form (Giroux & Simon, 1989). According to this thesis, reader/viewers are the powerless *victims* of mainstream cultural producers who, as privileged members of the dominant class, disseminated bourgeois patriarchal ideology disguised as 'entertainment' in service of their own class interests (Radway, 1984).[8] As the following section reveals, the wealth of audience reception research which emerged in the 1980s can be viewed, at least in part, as a reaction against this overly deterministic conception of textual semiosis and the inherent limitations of the structuralist paradigm more generally.

Audience-Based Studies

As well as constituting a reaction against the textual emphasis of *Screen* studies, the 'new' reception analysis also comprised a response to the dominance of behaviourist effects and Uses and Gratifications research within America in particular (Curran, 1996b; Morley, 1996). Increasingly, scholars within the field of Cultural Studies realised that in order to gain insight into the interpellations and possible ideological

or political significance of media products within contemporary society, it was necessary to resurrect the audience as a site for critical investigation (Lewis, 1991). Within British Cultural Studies, and particularly the BCCCS, this realisation reflected an assimilation of key insights derived from French poststructuralist theory (Morley, 1980c). Derrida's reconceptualisation of meaning as produced within specific social and cultural contexts was especially pivotal in "decentering...the conceptual centrality of the text" (Nightingale, 1996, p. 62) within Cultural Studies during the early 1980s, and posed a direct and irrefutable challenge to the notion of textual authority so central to *Screen* theory and analysis.

But the mid-1980s were also marked by a concerted attack on the Althusserian notion of ideological dominance, which was charged with being crudely 'reductionist' in that it failed to recognise the relative autonomy of ideology from the economic base, and implied a degree of cultural and ideological domination which closer examination did not support (Curran, 1996a). Most notably, Hall argued that in practice, there was no coherent, singular ruling 'ideology'. Rather, the ideological sphere was comprised, as Curran puts it, of "clusters of ideas - 'a field of discourses' - which were incommensurate and contradictory" (Ibid., p. 132). Underpinning Hall's critical labour, then, was the Gramscian notion of hegemonic struggle outlined above. This new understanding prompted Hall and others to shift their attention away from the ideological effectivity of texts, toward (at first theoretical) exploration of the ways in which real audience members engage with, negotiate, and at times resist, textual interpellations and ideological discourse.

What united these new audience studies was a common interrogation of the view that media texts are able to exert some kind of *determining* effect on audience members, along with a commitment to investigating the way in which these texts are read, viewed and understood by differently located individuals (Jensen & Rosengren, 1990). In these terms, audiences were reconceived as actively involved in consuming, decoding and using media products, and researchers subsequently began to explore how different sections of the audience, located within specific contexts of reception, are able to draw on extra-textual frames of reference and consequently resist media constructions of reality (Ibid.).

Of course, such a focus was not entirely new within mass communications studies, as Curran (1990 and 1996b) points out. On the contrary, the new reception researchers largely resurrected the pluralistic conceptualisation of both media texts and audiences that had underpinned investigations into 'mediated effects' during the 1940s and 1950s. These studies effectively prefigured what Curran calls the new

'revisionist' arguments, by "documenting the multiple meanings generated by texts, the active and creative role of audiences and the ways in which different social and discourse positions encourage different readings" (Curran, 1996b, p. 266). Having said that, however, it is also clear that the new 'revisionism' actually comprised a relatively diverse range of approaches to the audience, three of which warrant some further discussion here.

The first followed in the tradition of Willis (1977) and Hebdige (1979), both of whom conducted insightful ethnographies of British working-class youth sub-cultures. Since then, numerous studies of media audiences have used methods derived from ethnography, such as participant observation and in-depth interviewing, to examine such things as television viewing and VCR use within the domestic context (Morley, 1986; Gray, 1987 and 1992; Lull, 1990; Zwaga, 1994), the nature of women's engagement with television soap opera (Hobson, 1980, 1982, 1989 and 1990; Ang, 1985; Seiter, Borchers, Kreutzner & Warth, 1989; Press, 1992) and the social meaning of popular romantic fiction for its female fans (Radway, 1984).[9]

The findings of a number of these studies presented an additional challenge to the dominance of the (structuralist) Althusserian paradigm within Cultural Studies during this period. Hobson (1980), for example, found that television viewing within traditional households was gender-differentiated, with women actively choosing programmes which they saw as relating to their 'feminine' world (such as quiz shows, movies, and soap operas) while avoiding those programmes which related to the 'masculine' world (including news and current affairs, documentary, and adventure fiction). Her identification of *gender* as a factor in differentiating audience receptions effectively interrupted the reigning assumption that socioeconomic class was the primary structuring factor in society. And in a later study of the British daytime soap, *Crossroads*, Hobson (1982) revealed that for women, television viewing was not conducted in isolation but rather, was selectively incorporated into their daily domestic routines and responsibilities such that women often watched while knitting, ironing or even conversing with other family members, a finding supported by Morley (1986), Ang (1989a) and Seiter et al. (1989).

The significance of these and other such findings lay in their revelation that many viewers did not adopt the concentrated, fully-engaged style of viewing so crucial to the logic of *Screen* theory. That is to say, the identification of a more dispersed mode of viewing implied that viewers might not make the 'formalist' or complete reading necessary for the text to secure its ideological meaning and 'effect'. Indeed, the very notion of a 'complete reading' was called into question by the new evidence that

many viewers were able to simply block out certain major aspects of a narrative (Seiter et al., 1989). As Gledhill (1988) suggests, the notion that the 'last word' of the text comprised the final memory of the audience was thus shown to have derived more from the requirements of structural analysis than the documented practices of real audience members.

A theoretically-inspired affirmation of viewer 'activity' grounds the second strand in audience-based Cultural Studies, vocally present within both Britain and America and most frequently associated with the work of John Fiske (1987, 1989a, 1989b and 1992) and more recently Angela McRobbie (1992). As Morley (1996) argues, this work represents something of an extreme position within the new revisionist research, due to the emphasis it places on audience participation, pleasure and 'empowerment'. Underpinning this emphasis is Roland Barthes's notion of popular texts as endlessly polysemic or 'writerly', which, bolstered by Derrida's view of meaning as unstable and always in the process of retrospective construction, leads these scholars to perceive media texts as open to a plurality of different readings. They consequently highlight textual heterogeneity and undecidability, and claim that the inevitable presence of internal contradictions facilitates the construction of "divergent or subversive interpretations" (Curran, 1996a, p. 135). This potential for audiences to 'read differently' is held to be an effective counterpoint to the ideological force of media texts (Fiske, 1987).

While this approach usefully revises earlier notions of media audiences as subject to the ideological discourse and interpellations of cultural texts, studies in resistance have been strongly criticised for their 'celebratory' tone, which evidently leads these scholars to find and valorise traces of audience resistance and opposition at every turn. Such work has also been denounced for underestimating the textual limitations on audience participation and creativity; limitations which other reception analysts argue need to be acknowledged and theorised (Ang, 1989a; Corner, 1991; Curran, 1996a; Morley, 1996).

A rather more critical perspective has thus been adopted by the third strand of audience-based research within Cultural Studies, generally associated with the BCCCS and Hall's work on the encoding and decoding of cultural texts (Hall, 1980a). As opposed to simply inverting the traditional emphasis on textual signification, Hall's model of communication attempts to account for the active consumption of cultural messages *as well as* their production, textual organisation and latent ideological content. It thus privileges *neither* the text nor the audience, since neither is seen to exert a 'determining effect' on meaning production (Ibid.).

As part of his reconfiguration of the communicative circuit, Hall employs a poststructuralist conception of textual signification and thus recognises some degree of undecidability or polysemy in meaning, while still attending to the way in which texts can be seen to mediate dominant ideological discourses. Whereas more conventional modes of textual analysis would emphasise the closed and singular nature of a text's ideological meaning, Hall's model acknowledges Volosinov's characterisation of the sign as "multi-accentuated" (Volosinov, 1973, p. 41). That is to say, it recognises that signs are *theoretically* able to carry various and potentially limitless alternative significations.

Hall rejects, however, the notion that cultural messages are *in practice* 'infinitely productive' or 'endlessly polysemic' and hence open to entirely idiosyncratic interpretations. In his view, the range of possible meanings is, in practice, curtailed by producers who, in writing/encoding a text, construct the parameters for its eventual decoding.[10] This internal organisation is seen to exert certain determining conditions, in the sense that the possible meanings that can be made from a text do not carry equal weight, but rather enter into a power relation with those favoured by its overall discursive structure, an understanding which again reflects the influence of Gramsci's theory of hegemonic struggle. Hall claims that most cultural texts are, in other words, "structures in dominance" (Hall, 1980a, p. 134), in the sense of containing preferred or intended readings encoded into them by their author/producer. These preferred readings are in turn seen to reflect the wider ideological divisions and relations of power within contemporary capitalist societies. In terms of this model, then, textual organisation does indeed operate to place certain *constraints* on the production of meaning, but cannot *determine* the actual interpretations that will be made of any cultural text.

Struggles over meaning are thus seen to take place primarily at the level of reception (Ibid.). Revising Parkin's (1971) idealised categorisation of Western value systems, Hall identifies three hypothetical positions in which the decoder may stand in relation to the encoded message, a model which implicitly relied on homogenised notions of socio-economic class membership. He suggests that those who share the interpretative framework affirmed within a text will generally accept the dominant meaning and make a *preferred* reading, while those who only partly share that framework might relate the text to their own experiences and social positionings in a way which allows them to *negotiate* its meaning in some way. Those who have access to an alternative interpretative framework, on the other hand, may potentially reject the text's privileged meaning and make sense of it in a way which *opposes* and even critiques its ideological message.

In its time, Hall's model clearly represented a significant advance on existing theoretical constructions of the communication process, and stimulated a great deal of interest and related reception research, some of which is discussed in chapter V. The most influential of these studies was David Morley's investigation into *The 'Nationwide' Audience* (1980a), which sought to test Hall's hypothetical reading categories, and which quickly became a landmark study in the developing field of reception analysis.[11] On the basis of this study, Morley suggests that individual differences in interpretation are framed and constrained *but not determined* by socio-cultural factors such as class, and hence argues that decodings *cannot* be reduced in any simple way to socioeconomic location. Rather, the relationship between decoding and class location appears to be *mediated* by the discursive and institutional affiliations of differently positioned viewers (Morley, 1980b). Hence, Morley argues that

> The meaning of the text will be constructed differently according to the discourses (knowledges, prejudices, resistances) brought to bear on the text by the reader: the crucial factor in the encounter of audience/subject and text will be the range of discourses at the disposal of the audience. (Ibid., p. 50)

Morley's work thus effectively constitutes a critique of Hall's original schema on various grounds, including its overly deterministic conception of the relationship between structural location and interpretation, and its failure to specify the process through which one can identify the 'preferred reading' of any given media text. Morley later extended his critique to problematise the inference that broadcasters are *consciously* aware of the meanings 'carried' by their products and, furthermore, fully intend them to be decoded in accordance with the dominant ideology and the interests that ideology represents - their own (Morley, 1992). In light of this new understanding, he called for researchers to "investigate the ways in which structural factors are articulated through discursive processes" (Morley, 1980b, p. 56), and to widen their approach to examine the *context* of textual production as well as the *text itself*, along with its *reception* by differently-located audience members (Nightingale, 1996).[12]

It is clear that the *Nationwide* study marked the beginning of a new era in audience-based research within Cultural Studies, during which researchers have moved beyond questions of media effects and audience 'activity' versus 'passivity' to explore the relationship between social and sub-cultural location and audience reception (Ibid.).[13] Increasingly, the new reception analysts have come to conceive

the process of meaning construction as influenced by a range of factors, including the structure of the text itself, the social context within which it is encountered, the cultural affinities of different audience members, and the ways in which cultural factors influence their various knowledges and predispositions (Boyd-Barrett, 1995). And while many of the early reception studies followed Morley's lead in analysing differences within the 'mass' audience based on viewers' location within the *class* structure, this research 'repertoire' was soon extended to investigate the role of gender, ethnicity, age, and other social group memberships in shaping audience interpretation and response. More recently, it has been acknowledged that these traditional sociological categories are in turn fragmented by various other sources of difference, such as political affiliation and religious belief (see chapter V for further discussion of this work).

The present study is situated within this latter tradition of audience reception analysis. It therefore draws from the strengths of Morley's groundbreaking work, in particular its recognition of the need to attend to both media products and their reception, its ability to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the interdiscursive processes involved in audience reception, and its attempt to situate these processes within a more sufficient sociological context (Curran, 1996b). At the same time, it attempts, as others have done, to address and overcome some of the more serious limitations of audience reception studies, including a tendency to be overly reliant on the accurate self-reporting of participants. As Nightingale notes,

> What was overlooked in the return to the audience were the problems inherent in relying on what people are *able to articulate*.... And what was lost in this project was the specificity of address, the meeting of discourses in the interaction of reader and text, which constituted the promise, and the difference from traditional audience research, of the cultural studies experiment. (Nightingale, 1996, p. 63; emphasis added)

Likewise, Curran (1996b) denounces the reluctance of the new reception analysts to use methods which would more adequately recognise differences within and between groups of individuals. Others such as Corner (1991, p. 269) have criticised this work for its "sociological quietism", and lament that political issues concerning media power seem to have slipped off the research agenda within contemporary Cultural Studies. For this theorist, "increasing emphasis on the micro-processes of viewing relations displaces an engagement with the macro-structures of media and society" (Ibid.). Yet as Morley (1996) notes, the focus of the new reception research reflects the view that these macro-structures can only be reproduced through micro-

processes, a notion which similarly grounds the tri-partite approach adopted in this study and outlined below.

Analytical Framework of this Study

Having located the present investigation within the field of audience reception research, this section outlines how each of the 'discursive sites' examined in this study has been conceptualised and details the various research methods employed, along with the rationale for their use. This study effectively melds techniques often used in qualitative audience research with discourse analysis. By combining these very different analytical procedures, it was hoped that the present study might more fully realise the implications of the 'poststructuralist turn' within Cultural Studies, and more particularly, its highlighting of the role played by discourse in mediating the encounter between media texts and their reception by structurally and socially-located audience members. Since the latter techniques are less well-known, yet feature very prominently within the methodology used in this study, they perhaps warrant some initial discussion before proceeding.

Discourse Analysis

While the method of discourse analysis used in this study is clearly informed by Foucault's insights into the nature of discourse, power and subjectivity, it departs from his preferred analytical techniques on the grounds that these provide less than effective models for the analysis of discrete cultural texts, particularly when one's concern is with discursive articulations relating to a discrete set of objects, at a specific historical moment and within a particular historical, social, cultural, political and economic context. Foucault's work is also somewhat short on succinct examples of *how* to methodically dissect specific spoken, written or visual productions (Fairclough, 1992). Given that the analysis of such texts is a central component of the present study, it was necessary to look elsewhere for a more effective model of discourse analysis.

Locating an appropriate model was not, however, a straightforward process. A vast array of methods, all termed 'discourse analysis', are employed in various ways within a number of different disciplines, including linguistics, literary studies, psychology, anthropology, and communication studies. Many of these disciplines work with a different definition of discourse to that proffered by Foucault. Within linguistics, for example, discourse is defined as 'dialogue', or 'speech acts', and hence discourse analysis is held to involve the

> ...*linguistic* analysis of naturally occurring connected spoken or written discourse.... [Discourse analysis] refers to attempts to study the organisation of language above the sentence or above the clause, and therefore to study larger linguistic units, such as conversational exchanges or written texts. (Stubbs, 1983, p. 1; emphasis added)

Of primary concern to these scholars are matters pertaining to linguistic *form*. A substantial body of theory and analysis is thus devoted to revealing the rules, transactions and actions that organise written and spoken utterances and interactions. Some of those working within the linguistic paradigm consequently examine such things as text structure, vocabulary, grammar, tense, intonation, conversational conventions such as turn-taking and so forth, while others are more concerned with conversational style, rhetoric, and argumentation. These various modes of 'discourse analysis' are typically associated with journals such as *Discourse Processes, Text, Journal of Pragmatics, Cognitive Linguistics* and *Discourse & Society.*

Other scholars have been more concerned with matters pertaining to the *social content* of discourse, defined in Foucauldian terms as a '*mode* of talking'. A growing body of work within the field of social psychology, for example, works with his definition of discourse as constructive of social reality and as productive of objects and categories. Parker (1992, p. 5), for example, defines a discourse as "a system of statements which constructs an object". Others have explored the way in which social subjects, social relations and systems of knowledge and belief are constructed, and concern themselves with the relationship between discourse, social reproduction and struggle over power. Potter and Wetherell (1987, p. 7), for instance, emphasise the social content of discourse in their model of discourse analysis, which attempts to obtain "a better understanding of social life and social interaction" by studying social texts. Their later work on racism focuses on discourses which reproduce social relations of domination and oppression (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Such issues are also of central concern for feminist psychologists such as Hollway (1984 and 1989), Gavey (1989), and others whose work has appeared in the journal *Feminism & Psychology.*

As this discussion suggests, there exists no consensus on the 'correct' definition of discourse, nor method of discourse analysis; no standard set of formal procedures, nor any universally-accepted rules to follow. Rather, methodological choices have to be made in accordance with the theoretical orientation of the researcher and their perception of the sort of method likely to suit the overall focus of the research. As

outlined above, the theoretical orientation of this study is informed by poststructuralist theory. Its primary focus is on the social content of discourse rather than its linguistic form, and its key objective is to understand the role of American entertainment television in an on-going struggle to define the meaning of 'motherhood' and 'the family' here in New Zealand. For these reasons, the methodology used in this study draws from those works which attempt to analyse the social content of discourse within various contexts, from a Foucauldian perspective. It thus lends from the works of Hollway (1984 and 1989), Wetherell and Potter (1992) and Fairclough (1992 and 1995) in developing a framework for analysing each of the discursive sites examined - the American sitcom episode *Murphy's Revenge,* the context of its production in the United States in 1992, the context of its reception here in New Zealand in 1995, and participants' actual readings of it.

One of the first steps was that of *identifying* the dominant discourses circulating within each site, along with the sets of themes, concepts and statements defining their unique construction of 'motherhood' and 'the family'. Doing so, however, was not an entirely clear-cut procedure, and involved the careful reading and re-reading of a wide range of texts. The intention here was to identify patterns in the concepts, themes and statements articulated in certain texts as opposed to others. Texts which 'talked about' their object in much the same 'language' were grouped together and taken to be expressions of the same discourse or 'world view'. Obviously, initial categorisations were tentative at best, and were reformulated and revised several times during these early stages. While this might appear a somewhat imprecise and haphazard process, others have discussed the need for categories to remain flexible at first to avoid prematurely excluding potentially significant discursive articulations, and conversely to avoid including those which, on further scrutiny, prove insubstantial (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Lewis, 1991; Coyle, 1995).

Various discursive categories were consequently solidified and named, and illustrated where possible with evidence drawn from the actual texts examined. Besides providing a basis for subsequent analysis, this process of identification and categorisation also acknowledges the theoretical insight that the discursive world is not "a discrete collection of separate utterances" but rather, one "rooted in cultural commonalities and ideological unities" (Lewis, 1991, p. 120). Indeed, one of the real strengths offered by this approach is its ability to recognise that both this American sitcom episode and its reception by the participants in this study remain infused within a wider cultural world, and hence that neither are the entirely unique productions of autonomous individuals.

The Tri-Partite Approach

The methodological framework adopted here proceeds from a poststructuralist conception of meaning as generated "out of the collaborative interaction of authors and producers, texts and readings within specific contexts" (Boyd-Barrett & Newbold, 1995, p. 4). It draws from (but amends slightly) the model of tri-partite research developed by Thompson (1990), who suggests that an adequate model of mass communication research needs to investigate and account for the operation of three related aspects, or loci, of meaning production. These are, firstly, "the *production and transmission or diffusion* of symbolic forms"; secondly, "the *construction* of the media message"; and thirdly, "the *reception and appropriation* of media messages" (Thompson, 1990, p. 304).

The first of these aspects refers to the processes involved in textual production. Thompson suggests that an investigation into this aspect of communication could attempt to reveal, for example, the "patterns of ownership and control" governing the media institution within which a text is produced and transmitted, the "techniques and technologies" employed in the process, and the "routine procedures" followed by directors, writers, editors, camera persons, programmers and marketers in the course of doing their jobs (Ibid.). Thompson also suggests that an interpretative investigation could be conducted into the motivations of the individuals involved in textual production and transmission, or "the ways in which they understand what they are doing, what they are producing and what they are trying to achieve" (Ibid., p. 305). The second aspect identified by Thompson - that of the construction of the media message itself - could in his view be investigated through an examination of such things as the "juxtaposition of words and images", "the structure of the narrative or argument", the extent to which this structure "allows for sub-plots, digression or dissent", and "the ways in which narrative tension is combined with features such as humour" (Ibid.). Thompson suggests that the third aspect - the reception and appropriation of media messages - might involve the investigation of the context and circumstances of viewing, or perhaps the way in which viewers' interpretation and response varies according to the socio-economic class, gender, ethnicity, age and geographic location of differently positioned individuals. It could also involve exploration of the implications of variation in interpretation and response for the wider power relations within which viewers are situated (Ibid.).

By analysing each of these three sites of meaning construction, Thompson claims that it is possible to gain insight into the ideological character of media messages; or in other words, "the ways in which the meaning mobilized by particular messages may serve, in certain circumstances, to establish and sustain relations of domination"

(Ibid., p. 307). Thompson also maintains that focusing on just one of these sites of meaning production in abstraction from the others would provide a very limited understanding of the process of mass communication, a point with which I concur. In his view, a more comprehensive approach would examine each of these sites in turn, and would also demonstrate how they inform, relate to and offer insight into each other.

Seeking to do precisely this, the present study draws to a large extent from this tri-partite model and its description of each aspect of the communication process. It differs, however, in one important respect - that of the emphasis and scope of the first aspect, which Thompson defines as the production and transmission or diffusion of media texts. While not disputing that such an investigation would very likely offer extremely valuable insight into the construction of media messages, an in-depth investigation into the immediate context of textual production and transmission lay outside the scope of this study. Furthermore, Thompson's quite specific emphasis on what I would term the *micro* context of textual production and transmission is somewhat limited. Such a narrow focus is, I maintain, likely to come at the expense of paying due attention to the *macro* social, political, economic and discursive field within which the (micro) institutional context of production is *itself* situated. Knowledge of this wider sphere is necessary in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the motivations and decisions of individuals involved in media production, along with the way in which a particular media message is constructed and why. In this view, the construction of media messages is held to be informed by the wider social, political, economic and discursive field *at least as much* as it is informed by the more immediate environment of a particular media institution and the social relations of a particular production studio, neither of which exist inside a vacuum.

A similar point is made in relation to the reception and appropriation of media messages, which is likewise situated within a broader macro context - that of the social, political, economic and discursive field within which viewing takes place. Like media texts, audience interpretations and responses cannot be fully apprehended in abstraction from this wider context. As Jordin and Brunt suggest,

> One would expect any materialist study of how different social groups decode television to pay particular attention to contextual questions - from the groups' immediate conditions of existence to the broad socio-historical and cultural context. (Jordin & Brunt, 1986, p. 237)

The interrelationship between these different aspects of the process of communication has consequently been reconceptualised in this study, as depicted in Figure 1 below. The specific terrain of each aspect as it relates to the present study is identified in square brackets. The reader should also note that this is a model of the *cross-cultural* audience-text encounter - obviously, in cases where there is no shift between national or geographic boarders, the macro context is the same for both production and reception. Finally, while these various aspects are held to be inextricably interconnected, they will be discussed independently below for the sake of clarity.

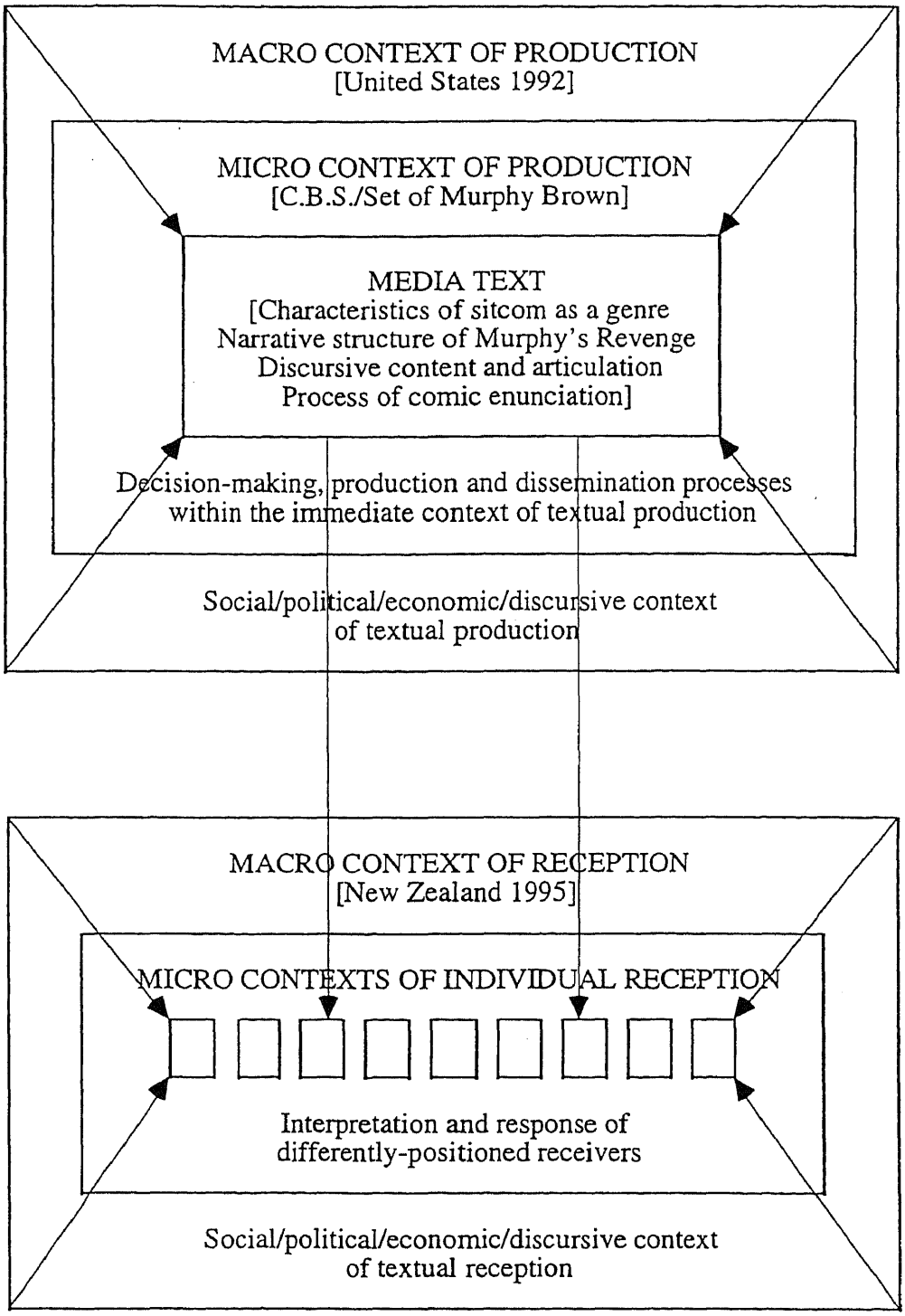

Figure 1: Aspects Of Cross-Cultural Communication

The Macro Context of Textual Production

According to the theoretical conceptualisation of mass communication outlined above, the signifying potential of any media text cannot be considered in isolation from the macro context within which it is produced and distributed. Wren-Lewis advocates this position in calling for a reassertion of

> the status of television as a...signifying apparatus inscribed *within* the political/social/cultural world.... [T]he televisual media are a *part* of the range of signifying practices that produce and reproduce meanings, that structure relations of dominance and hegemony. (Wren-Lewis, 1983, p. 182-3)

At a theoretical level, this understanding draws from the Foucauldian insight that discursive practices are always interdependent and relational, or 'interdiscursive' (Foucault, 1972). This insight has been usefully applied to media texts, which according to Fairclough (1992, p. 39-40) are 'intertextual' in the sense that they "draw upon and transform other contemporary and historically prior texts" and are defined in relation to them. In a similar vein, Jhally and Lewis (1992) argue that the meaning of a particular media text can be seen to derive in large part from the way in which its content interacts with the discourses that circulate and pervade it. Acknowledging this interdiscursivity, Parker and Burman (1993, p. 158) suggest that analysts need to be aware of concerns pertaining to the broader context of production - such as cultural trends and political and social issues - to which the text refers, on the grounds that if "you do not know what a text is referring to, you cannot produce a reading".

To put this another way, both texts and those who produce them can be understood as situated within a discursive context that is considerably wider than the production studio or even the broadcasting industry per se, and which comprises the specific mix of political and economic systems, public institutions, national history, cultural identity, and social practices and interactions characteristic of the country within which a particular programme is produced. As citizens of a particular country, those involved in televisual production inevitably draw from the national and cultural context in which they are situated, referring implicitly and sometimes explicitly to features of their own historical, cultural, political, economic and social 'realities'. The programmes they produce thus resonate with meanings which serve as reference points to their contextual specificity at the moment of production.

In order to understand those meanings in the manner intended by programme makers, viewers and analysts alike need to share, to some degree at least, the 'pool'

of historical, national, cultural, political, economic and social knowledges and experiences drawn on by those involved in television production. Some examination of the wider discursive context of a text's production is thus considered crucial to a fuller understanding of its signifying potential. For this reason, it is necessary to look beyond the text itself to survey the social, historical, political and geographic context of its production, with the specific aim of becoming more familiar with the national, political and economic organisations, public institutions, social conventions, public events (both historical and contemporary) and figures to which the text refers.

Obviously, to survey this context in its entirety is a massive undertaking, and much of the information it would generate would be largely superfluous to the relatively modest purpose of reception research. I am not suggesting that it is necessary to know *everything* about the context of a text's production, but rather that it is necessary to familiarise oneself with, in particular, the way in which the social and political events, conflicts and debates it grapples are typically manifested within and negotiated within the wider cultural, political, economic, social and discursive sphere. What is needed here is some attempt to chart the range of possible ways in which these events, conflicts and debates can be reconstituted within the context of production, since this provides the 'pool' of potential accounts that can be drawn on by cultural producers. Some understanding of the referents of culturally specific references is also needed, and knowledge of other cultural products within the same genre would also be useful, given Fairclough's insight into the relational significance of contemporary and historically prior texts.

In terms of the present investigation, the potentially unwieldy task of charting the wider discursive pool was made considerably easier by the fact that *Murphy's Revenge* responds very explicitly to comments made by former vice president Dan Quayle about Murphy Brown's status as a single mother. As detailed in the following chapter, Quayle's comments prompted a great deal of social and political debate, much of which took place within the United States media. Through the internet (and in particular the search programmes *Uncover* and *First Search*) numerous references to the original incident, its background and aftermath were located within an array of sources, including print media news coverage and commentary, transcripts of television news reports, political press releases, and editorials and commentary published in magazines and academic journals. Using these primary sources (which represented a fairly broad spectrum of response to Quayle's assertions) it was possible to glean considerable insight into the immediate context of Quayle's remarks. A selection of secondary sources were then drawn from

to further contextualise this incident within the wider social, economic, political, cultural and discursive context of American society in the early 1990s.

From this initial survey, it was apparent that while Quayle's comments were immediately situated within the context of widespread social disruption following the Los Angeles riots of May 1992, they implicitly referred to a much wider debate over the concept of 'family values' already percolating within the political, social and cultural spheres in the United States. Furthermore, this debate clearly encompassed a number of related issues, such as single motherhood, welfarism, fatherhood, and early childcare. Drawing on a range of sources, including findings from social science research, academic and print media discussions of the issues of single motherhood and family values, and secondary works on motherhood, the family, social change and moral values in America around this period, it was possible to chart at least some of the ways in which these issues were constructed and debated within the macro context of textual production. In terms of the theoretical framework underpinning this investigation, these different ways of constructing and debating the issues were understood to comprise a significant portion of the discursive 'pool' of competing accounts potentially available to the producers of this episode.

Through this process of contextualisation, the referents of various culturally-specific references made in the episode also became apparent, many of which related to American political figures and, by implication, their political perspectives. A range of secondary sources were drawn on for specific details of the characteristic features of sitcom as a cultural form, and for information pertaining to similar texts within this genre. Since this prong of the investigation aimed simply to *situate* this episode within the wider environment in which it was produced in the United States in the latter part of 1992, analysis did not proceed beyond this preliminary stage of charting the wider cultural, political, economic, social and generic context and identifying the various discourses potentially available to the producers of this text.

The Text

Consistent with the theoretical stance adopted in this study and the model of mass communication outlined above, I would argue that the textual analysis of media output should properly acknowledge the media's active participation in a much wider, on-going process of discursive contestation, struggle and change. Furthermore, this process should be viewed as largely particular to the social, historical, political and geographic context of textual production. Extending these insights, which draw from Gramsci's theory of hegemony outlined above, Philo

(1990 and 1993) argues that the media comprise a key site for the enacting of wider struggles over contested meanings, and provide a conduit for attempts to win legitimacy and consent to particular knowledges or 'regimes of truth'. He suggests that media meanings are deliberately constructed in response to particular social and political events, conflicts and debates, and work to 'frame' them in a way which legitimates particular ways of understanding those events, conflicts and debates while excluding or downplaying other possible accounts or explanations (Philo, 1990; Corner, Richardson & Fenton, 1990a; Roscoe, Marshall & Gleeson, 1995). Media texts are also seen to 'set the agenda'[14] for discussion of the often controversial issues they present, by way of defining both what is most important to talk about, and how those issues can be discussed and understood. Philo (1993) consequently claims that underlying the content of many media texts are taken-for-granted and often interested assumptions regarding what is normal, acceptable, legitimate and important within a society.

While concurring with this view of media texts as 'setting agendas' in terms of their content and as structured in ways that privilege particular readings over others, I would also emphasise that such texts remain situated within, and hence embody and also re-produce, discursive struggles taking place within a context that is considerably wider than the production studio. Media texts are thus regarded as something rather more than a mere conduit for, or reflection of, wider cultural processes. Foucault suggests that cultural texts should themselves be understood as *productive networks,* since they "form knowledge and produce discourse" (Foucault, 1971, cited in Morris & Patton, 1980, p. 36). Further, he views such texts as *participants* in a wider discursive struggle over the meaning of objects and human experiences which remain, at the very least, contested terrains. In this way, media texts are re-conceived as active participants in the articulation of wider cultural frameworks, and as intimately involved in the on-going process through which meanings are determined, contested and re-negotiated *within the context of* a wider struggle for discursive ascendancy.

Hence, while a preferred reading might be identified through structural analysis, to do so offers no proof of its ideological effectivity, both because the meaning of the text cannot be singularly fixed once and for all, and because authorial intention cannot guarantee that this preferred meaning will be the meaning decoded by any individual viewer (Derrida, 1976; Barthes, 1977). Even where the structure of a text might clearly privilege a certain discursive voice, this voice will not necessarily provide viewers with a source of comprehensibility for actions or statements within the text, both because alternative discourses are always present (both implicitly

within the text itself and within the wider macro context of its reception), and because hegemonic discourses are not spread evenly across the body public, and therefore enjoy different degrees of credibility among different sections of any audience (Morley, 1980b; Philo, 1990 and 1993; Roscoe et al., 1995).

In light of this understanding, media texts are reconceived as sites in which an array of different discourses struggle to impose, confirm, challenge, negotiate or displace their different definitions of a range of social and political events, conflicts and debates. Within this context of competing discursive voices, the 'natural' authority of 'dominant' discourses is inevitably challenged and becomes subject to renegotiation. Thus, opportunities for idiosyncratic and resistant readings are animated, a potential which is heightened by the ability of readers and viewers to draw from subordinated textual discourses as well as the many others in circulation within the wider macro context of their reception.

This study therefore highlights the need to examine the process of negotiation between the meanings preferred by the text and their various alternatives, which are often present within the text itself and which are in constant circulation within the wider context of textual production. At the same time, this study also affirms the need to pay vigorous attention to the internal structures and processes which seek to place limits or constraints on the signifying potential of any text. In reconciling these two seemingly contradictory assertions, I take the view that media texts can be understood as sites for *both* the articulation and reproduction of particular discursive knowledges, subject positions and relations of power, *and* for the polysemic and potentially politicised interpretations of differently positioned viewers.

These theoretical insights can be extended to one of television's most enduring forms of cultural representation - the genre of situation comedy, which is of primary interest here. Theorists have long identified the centrality of language and discourse to television sitcom; indeed, one of the dominant characteristics of this genre is held to be the way in which it plays with conventions of language use (in the sense of using word plays, wit, verbal sparring and joke telling), and behaviour (in the sense of interrupting notions of propriety and conformity) (Goodlad, 1976; Eaton, 1981b; Curtis, 1982; Palmer, 1987). Drawing on insights offered by Derrida and Foucault, I take the view that sitcom's use of language is always located within discourse. Following Woolacott (1981 and 1986) and Palmer (1987), I thus suggest that television sitcoms are primarily discursive forms, both because they utilise language as opposed to action as their means of telling their stories, and because they bring together, for comic effect, different discourses of the wider social world. Indeed,

much of the appeal of television sitcoms can be seen to derive from the economy or wit with which these discourses are articulated and contrasted within the narrative (Woolacott, 1981 and 1986), a practice which inevitably produces contradictory forces of signification.

Adding to this undecidability, the mode of articulation employed in the production of some sitcoms - most notably those 'taped in front of a live studio audience' *itself* implies that no one discursive voice can remain entirely immune from comic critique. As discussed by Allen (1992b), such sitcoms typically accommodate a 'three-camera, live-tape' shooting, whereby scenes are performed in real time while being taped by three or more television cameras, the director cutting between these as the scene progresses. Mid and long shots necessarily predominate, since the camera movement needed in order to convey subjective point-of-view shots would intrude into the space of this live scene, making such shots rather uncommon and difficult to achieve. Three of the most important techniques used to bind film viewers into the text (the point-of-view and reverse-shot structures, and secondary identification with characters) are therefore absent (Ibid.). In television sitcom, then, it is not the gaze of the camera which frames the audience's point-of-view, but rather the narrative and dialogue which attempt to align viewers aurally with the perspective of a particular character by showing them in mid-shot while their witticisms are heard on the sound track (White, 1992a).

Of course, no investigation into the social significance of television sitcom would be sufficient without addressing its centrally defining characteristic - humour - particularly in terms of its potential 'effectivity'. As various commentators note, jokes can both contribute to our picture of the characters who utter them, and affect our perception of whoever, or whatever, are their victim (Palmer, 1987). In the hands of the skilled humorist, jokes can become effective tools deliberately employed for the purposes of either critiquing or affirming, ridiculing or defending particular people, values and discourses (British Film Institute, 1982). But since not all discourses are of equal weight, much is at stake in the choices made by sitcom writers and producers in terms of the discourses they will depict as absurd or contradict (Neale, 1981; Palmer, 1987). Numerous scholars consequently suggest that sitcom writers may consciously exploit the disruptive potential of comedy by using language in a way which interrogates the legitimacy of a particular social world, and argue that certain jokes may disrupt and call into question the traditional symbolic authority of figures such as fathers, lawyers, doctors and politicians - a mode of 'rebellion' which constitutes a frequent theme of sitcoms (Goodlad, 1976; Curtis, 1982; Palmer, 1987; Allen, 1992b; White, 1992a). Others have expressed the

opposite view, and argue that sitcoms can be viewed as rearticulating and reproducing the discourses, meanings and signifying structures of the dominant social order (Neale, 1981; Eaton, 1981b; Cantor & Pingree, 1983; Intinoli, 1984; Cantor, 1987 and 1990; Neale & Krutnik, 1990).

Suffice to say, television sitcom remains a complex and ambivalent form. In part, this ambiguity derives from the inherent contradictions which inhabit the process of comic articulation itself. Freud once described a joke as a "double dealing rascal who serves two masters at once" (Freud, 1976, p. 208). This characterisation is particularly apt given the mismatch between realist and formalist interpretative conventions, and also given that in theory and practice, the same joke may be interpreted in different and often contradictory ways by differently positioned viewers. Jokes are, in other words, inherently subject to some degree of negotiation in terms of their meaning and effectivity, and can be 'read' in terms of their structure and delivery (Lovell, 1982; Palmer, 1987), or as part of a story about contemporary life (Eaton, 1981b; Woolacott, 1981; Cook, 1982; Neale & Krutnik, 1990). Rather than attempting to determine the primacy of either comedy or narrative, however, I follow Cook (1982) in suggesting that both the comedy and narrative of television sitcom may be privileged by different viewers at different moments within the context of their idiosyncratic readings. In this view, either reading may take precedence at any one moment, depending on the relationship between the comic episode and the narrative as a whole, and depending also on the position of the viewer in relation to both the generic form of the text and the contradictory discourses at play within it.

In terms of investigative procedure, this theoretical understanding of television sitcom seemed to suggest a bi-focal approach to the analysis of this episode - one able to consider both the way in which this story is told and what is actually told. The latter half of chapter III thus delineates both the structure of this narrative (in terms of its organisation of story elements), and also its content, specifically in terms of identifying the discourses articulated and juxtaposed within it for comedic purposes. Toward this end, a verbatim transcript of *Murphy's Revenge* was firstly prepared and a synopsis compiled (see Appendix A). An analysis of this episode's narrative structure was then conducted following Tzvetan Todorov's (1977) model of classic realist narrative structure.[15] This was followed by a detailed examination of its narrative content and process of comic enunciation. Having already charted the 'discursive pool' available to the producers of this episode, it was possible to identify the various frameworks articulated within it and to assess the wider cultural significance of this episode's representation of much wider social and political

debates around 'motherhood' and 'the family'. Through a close examination of the nature of the interactions that occurred *between* these different discourses as these were given voice through the dialogue and subject-positioning of the characters, the process of comic enunciation and, to a lesser degree, the mode of visual articulation, it was feasible to demonstrate the way in which one particular discourse came to be privileged by both the structure and content of this narrative. On this basis, it was also possible to draw certain conclusions about this episode's potential ideological function (although this of course offers no proof of its *actual* effect at the point of reception).

The Context of Reception

The position of the viewer in relation to these contradictory discourses is, I suggest, of crucial importance in determining the sense they are able to make of any particular media text. Here, I am drawing on the Derridian notion that meaning is only ever temporarily and retrospectively secured within particular contexts of interpretation. Since such texts are given meaning through a range of contradictory discursive systems of meaning, the meaning of apparently fixed signifiers is able to shift and change within different discursive contexts (Derrida, 1978; Weedon, 1987). In relation to audience reception(s), this potential is held to be accentuated when media texts are 'received' in contexts that differ from that of their original production. While more recent studies are conscious of the need to examine these contexts (for example Corner, Richardson & Fenton, 1990b; Schlesinger, Dobash, Dobash & Weaver, 1992), context is all too frequently reduced to 'situational variables' such as class, gender and ethnicity within the more immediate context of decoding and interviewing. This rather simplistic interpretation is challenged in this study, which attends to features of both the macro and micro context of participants' cross-cultural receptions.

To expand on this understanding briefly; it has been argued above that the citizens of any given country will generally share, in full or in part, a common sense of national history and cultural identity which may extend to a familiarity with significant public events and the figures involved in them, and to an intimate experiential knowledge of their nation's political and economic organisations, public institutions and social conventions. In light of this understanding, it is supposed that the range of meanings likely to be made from any given text (for example, a television sitcom), will be influenced by the extent to which viewers share the discursive frameworks and cultural categories of that programme's producers. That is to say, in order to arrive at the same interpretation or reading that was privileged during the production process, viewers need to share, to some degree at least, the 'pool' of historical, national,

cultural, political, economic and social knowledges and experiences drawn on by the programme's producers. And while some of these knowledges and experiences (along with the frameworks and categories they engender) may be shared across national boundaries and geographical locations, others are specific to particular nations, spaces, cultures and social formations within them, and will not necessarily be possessed by cultural 'outsiders'.

This imbalance generates a two-fold effect. On the one hand, cultural 'outsiders' may lack the cultural resources that would enable them to make sense of 'local' textual references in the way that a cultural 'insider' might. On the other hand, there is additional potential for alternative meanings to be produced, because once a text circulates beyond its original context of production, it enters a new system of 'juxtapositions, oppositions and differentiations' which alter and shift its signifying potential in various, and often unpredictable, ways (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). That is to say, the text will now be read with reference to a subtly *different* set of discursive frameworks and cultural categories, and viewers will draw from a *different* set of historical, cultural, political and social knowledges and experiences, thereby implicating *different* public figures and events, political and economic organisations, public institutions and social conventions. This new context may offer alternative ways of understanding the social and political events, conflicts and debates depicted within a media text, and may provide access to accounts which contradict and destabilise that affirmed by it.

In terms of the present study, some degree of insight into the wider cultural, economic, political, social and discursive context of reception was thus considered necessary in order to obtain a more complete understanding of the factors influencing the way in which the New Zealand participants in this study made sense of this American sitcom text. The purpose of such an investigation was, firstly, to identify that set of 'shared' cultural, political, social and very material experiences and knowledges particular to *this* geo-political context, and thus potentially accessible to participants at the time of their textual encounter in 1995. A second purpose of this level of the investigation was to chart the range of possible ways in which the social and political events, conflicts and debates referred to in *Murphy's Revenge* could be reconstituted within the wider cultural context of New Zealand in 1995, since this would effectively comprise the 'discursive pool' available to participants in this study in constructing their responses to these issues.

The first set of contextual information was obtained from a range of sources, including population statistics, government policy statements, print media reports,

and academic commentary and analysis of New Zealand's social, political and economic status throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s. The second was gleaned through a structured 'cultural trawl' (Roscoe, 1994) of the wider macro context aimed at identifying those discourses commonly available to the participants in this study and potentially offering a language for 'talking about' various issues around 'motherhood' and 'the family'. This process involved the accumulation of nearly 300 discrete texts made publicly available within two key sites of discursive production and articulation - television and the print media.

In all, 127 individual television programmes were recorded during the period 1.3.95 - 16.6.95. Programmes were selected on the basis of being described in the *New Zealand Listener* television listings as dealing in some way with the issues of motherhood, single parenthood, working mothers, early child care, the family, and family values. Recorded programmes were subsequently categorised according to genre, and a smaller number from each category was randomly selected using Eton's Statistical Tables for coding on the basis of their underlying discursive framework(s).[16] This smaller number was roughly proportional to the total number of programmes taped for each genre - the large number of sitcoms and talk shows coded indicates the degree to which these sorts of issues form part of their staple fare. Figure 2 records the number of programmes taped in each genre, along with the number selected for coding (comprising approximately twenty-four percent of the total sample). Titles and other details of the selected programmes are listed in Appendix B.

GENRE	NUMBER TAPED	NUMBER CODED
Documentary/ Current Affairs/ ETV	10	3
Drama	18	4
Movie	13	3
Science Fiction	5	2
Sitcom/Comedy	29	6
Soap Opera	5	2
Talk Show	47	10
TOTAL	**127**	**30**

Figure 2: Programmes Surveyed

In addition, four publications were surveyed during the period 1.2.95 - 1.6.95 for reports and articles relating to the issues identified above, these being the daily newspapers *Waikato Times* and *New Zealand Herald*, and the weekly publications *New Zealand Listener* and *New Zealand Women's Weekly*. One hundred and forty-nine such reports and articles were collected.

Drawing from these written and audio-visual texts, and referring also to primary sources such as government policy statements and secondary sources discussing the discursive context of New Zealand during this period, it was possible to gain some degree of insight into the dominant repertoires circulating within the macro context of reception. Given that such insight was primarily significant in terms of its potential contribution to a more complete understanding of participants' receptions of this episode and their negotiations of the issues raised by it, analysis did not proceed beyond this initial stage of surveying the wider cultural, economic, political, and social environment and charting the key propositions of the major discourses circulating within it and hence potentially accessible to the participants in this study.

Audience Receptions

In terms of the theoretical understanding grounding this study, meanings are held to be subject to some degree of negotiation within different *micro* contexts of reception. That is to say, even where the structure of a text clearly privileges a certain discursive position or 'voice', this voice will not necessarily provide the sole framework through which the action and dialogue can be read, since different discourses enjoy different degrees of credibility among different sections of any audience. While the availability or otherwise of each discourse is clearly patterned at a level beyond that of the individual subject (Morley, 1980b), the combination of varying levels of textual polysemy and idiosyncratic viewing contexts allows meanings to shift in relation to the perspective of the individual viewer. As differently positioned viewers attempt to make sense of the text, they must 'sift' and choose between the different and competing discursive frameworks that circulate both within and around it (Kitzinger, 1993). In the process, phrases and bits of text will become specifically located as 'agents of definition' (Morris, 1988) within the various discursive strategies adopted by each.

In these terms, the process of reception is regarded, not as a passive absorption of a textually-embodied ideological meaning, but rather as a relatively active, selective and creative act of interpretation which takes place within certain definable limits (Morley, 1989; Moores, 1990). In the first instance, these limits are those laid down by the text itself, in terms of the agenda it sets and the way in which it frames the

events, conflicts and debates which it depicts. Thus, while it is clearly important to recognise viewer activity, it is also necessary to qualify the 'power' of viewers to construct a personally meaningful interpretation of any particular media product. As Ang (1990) suggests, this potential for reading differently is by no means comparable to the power of media producers to define and delimit the *agenda* of texts which viewers then interpret. In view of this insight, audience members are generally regarded as active *within* certain textual parameters defined by media producers (Roscoe et al., 1995).

Having made this qualification, it can be said that audience members are active in the sense that in the course of their selective and creative acts of interpretation, they will often draw on sources *other than* the information or 'clues' offered by the text itself. Among these additional sources are their "general framework of cultural references", "ideological, ethical, [and] religious standpoints", "psychological attitudes [and] tastes" and moral "value systems" (Eco, 1972, cited in Moores, 1990, p. 16); their personal experiences with the institutions, concepts and individuals the text refers to (Livingstone, 1986); and their political and economic interests (Jhally & Lewis, 1992). In terms of this understanding, each viewer can be seen to bring a *different* set of cultural and discursive knowledges to their individual textual encounter. The process of 'making sense' thus remains to a degree specific to particular social subjects who, by virtue of their unique histories and complex social affiliations, always exceed the subject implied by any particular media text. In cases where there is a lack of fit between the preferred meaning of a text and a viewer's own beliefs and discursive knowledges, they may possess the resources to re-negotiate the preferred 'meaning' and construct a different, even oppositional, reading of it, thereby producing a meaning which is more coherent with their own identities, values, interests and beliefs (Gledhill, 1988; Roman, 1988; Curran & Sparks, 1991; White, 1992a).

At the same time, however, audience readings are not expressive of idiosyncratic differences alone, since the frameworks and categories through which social subjects attempt to 'make sense' are generally shared across social formations. Interpretations are thus held to be socially patterned at the level of social group membership, in that they are not constructed in isolation from the social location of the viewer (Dahlgren, 1988; Morley, 1980b and 1992). Rather, individual readings are seen to be expressive of a person's location "within overlapping nexuses of cultural, social, ethnic, gender, linguistic, occupation and other sources of identity" (Boyd-Barrett & Newbold, 1995, p. 3), or as Morley originally suggested,

> It might be best to think of the audience not so much as an undifferentiated mass of individuals, but as a complicated pattern of overlapping sub-groups, and sub-cultures, within which individuals are situated. (Morley, 1980b, p. 50-51)

Furthermore, "members of a given sub-culture will tend to share a cultural orientation towards decoding messages in particular ways" (Ibid., p. 51). This cultural orientation will consist of shared tastes, accepted cultural practices, norms of social behaviour and privileged modes of subjectivity, all of which are set in place prior to any individual member's encounter with a media message, and which help shape and delimit his or her interpretation of that message. Similarly, an individual's membership of any particular social group or sub-culture will avail them of certain discourses, while restricting or denying their access to others (Morley, 1980c; Roscoe et al., 1995). Social subjects do not, in other words, have access to the full range of discourses to draw on when making sense of media messages. Their position within the wider particular social formations will tend to define which discourses they have access to, which in turn delimits the range of 'readings' they are realistically able to make of any particular text (Curran, 1990).

Furthermore, social subjects are always located within several such assemblages (Schrøder, 1994), and remain "the product of *multiple* social determinations" (Jordin & Brunt, 1986, p. 236; emphasis added). Since the positions of individuals within particular social formations or subcultures are not static or fixed, group or sub-cultural membership cannot be said to *determine* individual responses in any direct or unproblematic way (Philo, 1990). That is to say, the content and form of any individual account of a media message cannot be predetermined on the basis of their membership of a particular group, sub-culture or social formation, since it is not possible to accurately predict which aspect of their multi-faceted identity they will draw on in making sense of a particular text. As Fiske (1989b, p. 57) states, "any one viewer...may at different times be a different viewing subject, as constituted by his or her social determinants, as different social alliances may be mobilised for different moments of viewing". By drawing from these different social alliances, audience members are frequently able to access various discourses through which to construct their accounts of media texts (Dahlgren, 1988). Clearly, this understanding shifts the focus of audience reception research toward an exploration of the relationship between macro-social structures (such as social class) and micro-social processes at the level of individual reception (Jensen, 1991).

This reconceptualisation of the relationship between social structure and audience reception presents an immediate methodological problem for the investigation of New Zealanders' receptions of this episode. Those working within 'new' audience or reception studies have tended to investigate the receptions of defined social groups as collective entities for various practical and theoretically-inspired reasons.[17] While numerous practical difficulties have been identified in relation to the use of group interviews in reception research,[18] my primary rationale for rejecting this method is grounded in a perception that there is a mismatch between the theoretical insight that social subjects are the "product of *multiple* social determinations", and the dominant tendency to group research participants according to their membership of either a particular set of sociological categories (such as socioeconomic class, gender and/or ethnicity) or seemingly more immediately 'relevant' ones such as political, economic or personal interests. The position taken here is that such prior categorisations potentially exert a reductive effect by defining in advance what *is*, or *what should be*, the most pertinent aspect of an individual's identity in relation to a particular issue. Complex social subjects are, via this methodological practice, constructed for the purposes of reception research as a 'trade union official', or as a 'Heysham Nuclear Power Station worker', or as a 'lawyer'.

Obviously, such a construction does not necessarily mean that participants will draw *only* on that social group membership, nor that researchers need *only* recognise the ways in which that group membership informs their reading. Roscoe et al. (1995), for example, provide an enlightening case study of the way in participants may sometimes identify other group memberships as relevant to their reading, even within the research context of an artificially constructed homogeneity. This is illustrated by the response of one participant in their study of twelve audience groups' negotiations of the drama-documentary *Who Bombed Birmingham?* Classified according to his occupation as a British Telecom engineer, this participant spoke of the way in which his evaluation was primarily informed by his Labour Party activities and trade union membership, which he considered more central to his reading than his occupational status (Roscoe et al., 1995, p. 99). Clearly, however, examples such as this interrupt any notion of a definitive 'group reading' (Bengtsson, 1995). They also call into question the common methodological practice of grouping research participants in advance, and according to their membership of a *single* social group.

These considerations in mind, the methodological approach adopted for the audience research component of this study was that of one-on-one in-depth interviews with each participant immediately following their viewing of this American sitcom

episode, renamed for its New Zealand broadcast as *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato.* This approach does not, as Morley contends, necessarily reflect a conception of individuals as "social atoms divorced from their social context" (Morley, 1980, cited in Wren-Lewis, 1983, p. 195). As others have argued,

> [T]he individual is not a 'social atom', the simplest irreducible element of social life but, on the contrary, the most complex element, the point at which a multitude of shifting social and cultural determinations converge; and at a level of particularity in their concrete combination that defines the unique 'biography' of each individual. (Jordin & Brunt, 1986, p. 234)

This method was also seen to potentially offer a range of benefits over alternative procedures. Individual interviews are, for example, believed to generate more detailed responses than group discussions, and permit the researcher to explore the finer nuances of a single subject's interpretation/reception, without risk of excluding or annoying other participants. They are also held to give participants concentrated time in which to formulate their responses to the text and the issues it raises in their own words and according to their own agendas, as opposed to that set by more dominant group participants, or those opening the discussion. By interviewing participants individually, I hoped to attend to those aspects of reception that were unique or specific to them and their particular micro context of interpretation, while also attending to areas of commonality between those individuals who shared certain social group memberships.

Reception researchers have at times been criticised for adopting an overly casual attitude toward the selection of participants (MacGregor & Morrison, 1995). Too often, participants consist of the researcher's "friends, neighbours and relatives" (Höijer, 1990, p. 36), or individuals from among their "daily contacts" (Hallam & Marshment, 1995, p. 2). In selecting participants for this study, I wanted to avoid the obvious limitations of such an approach and solicited the involvement of a diverse (although not demographically representative) range of individuals mostly outside my own cultural milieu. Toward this end, an introductory form letter inviting the participation of any interested individuals was send to forty-six clubs and organisations operating in the city of Hamilton, including various health and welfare organisations, local branches of political parties, single issue lobby groups, cultural societies, women's groups and local businesses. The full text of this introductory letter can be found in Appendix C. A wide range of organisations were chosen in the hopes of reaching professional as well as working class men and women, members of ethnic minorities, political conservatives and also liberals, and members of

different groups known to have particular interests in the social negotiation of 'motherhood' and 'the family' (such as pro-life activists and feminists). Interested members were then contacted by telephone and a time was arranged for a pre-interview meeting, during which the research project was explained in more detail, and the precise nature of their involvement outlined. If the respondent was still interested in participating, their rights as a research participant were then explained. They were subsequently asked to sign a consent form and complete a confidential background questionnaire (Appendixes D and E).

This mail-out attracted twenty respondents, of whom sixteen were eventually selected to participate in the project. Since I had hoped to find between twenty and twenty-five participants, and given that a considerable number had already been located independently of my own personal and professional networks, these networks were utilised at this latter point. As a result of 'spreading the word' through these networks, a further five individuals expressed an interest in participating, just one of whom was previously known to me. Four of these individuals were eventually selected. The last two participants were found using the 'snowballing' technique - one participant asked a friend if he was interested in being involved, and he in turn asked his girlfriend. In the end, twenty-two respondents were selected to participate on the basis of information supplied in their background questionnaire. When selecting participants, I aimed to include a diverse range of individuals in terms of gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, age, religion and political affiliation. The table in Appendix F suggests that some degree of success was achieved here.

A time and place to hold the viewing and interview session was decided on either at the conclusion of the pre-interview meeting, or during a subsequent telephone call. The vast majority of these sessions took place in the participant's own home; just one was conducted in the home of a colleague of the interviewee (who was also a participant in this research), and another took place at the University in my office. The interviews were conducted immediately following the viewing of the episode, and all were recorded on audio-tape. Before commencing, each participant was informed of my interest in finding out what they thought about the programme and the issues it raised, and each was also reminded of their right to decline to answer any question or withdraw their consent at any time. The interviews were then conducted on a relatively informal basis following a structured interview schedule consisting of seventy predominantly open-ended questions grouped into several sections (see Appendix G).

As much as possible, I attempted to create an atmosphere in which participants would feel able to speak freely and openly about the programme and be frank about their response to it. I adopted an active listening role throughout the interviews, and encouraged each participant to elaborate on their responses as much as possible. Overall, the interviews ranged in duration from thirty-five minutes to two hours, although most lasted somewhere between fifty minutes and one and a half hours. As a rule, I avoided correcting any misinterpretations or supplying information about the programme or events depicted in it, unless specifically asked to. Immediately following the interview, participants were thanked for their involvement and reminded of their right to have copies of any extracts referring to their interview forwarded to them for their approval, and to have their tape returned to them at the completion of the project if they wished.

Verbatim transcripts of the interviews were subsequently made by myself and a professional typist. The system used in preparing the transcripts indicated pauses in discussion, but did not time their length. Repetitions and overlaps were also transcribed, but not intonation or voice level. Words emphasised by the participants were italicised in the transcripts. While included in the original transcripts, all hesitations, repetitions and fillers (such as 'you know', 'sort of', 'um', and 'ah') have been removed from the extracts in chapters V, VI, and VII. [...] indicates that portions of text have been omitted, while [.../...] indicates that a question along with its response has been omitted. Conventional punctuation has been used as a courtesy to participants and a guide to readers.

Analysis of the interview data was qualitative and proceeded in two distinct phases. The preliminary phase firstly involved the close examination of each transcript as a whole, in order to become thoroughly acquainted with the data. Careful attention was paid to the overall tone and 'feel' of each transcript, noting any particularly interesting or unusual elements of the proffered interpretation or response. The issues which seemed to be most salient to each participant were identified at this stage. Direct and indirect references to the macro contexts of production and reception and to the participant's own biography and their demographic/social group membership(s) were also highlighted. A record of general themes in participants' responses to the various questions relating to issues around 'motherhood' and 'the family' was also made. This preliminary phase also entailed collective analysis of the transcripts. Responses to each question were collated into separate files and initially categorised according to the content and tenor of response. At this early stage, I tried to avoid having any particular expectations of the data, and instead concentrated as much as possible on its methodical classification. Having said that, it

is inevitable that these categories will have been influenced to some degree by my existing understanding of audience reception and the relevant research, and hence the interview data cannot be said to have 'spoken for itself' in any unmediated way.

The second phase of analysis sought to recognise the insights offered by existing reception theory and research as offering a 'pool' of potential explanatory concepts which needed to be tested and applied to the collective data produced by this study. In turn, this data was conceived as offering reflexive insight into the usefulness (as well as the limitations) of existing categories. My aim during this phase was to apply these categories, identifying where they seemed to 'fit' with my own data, while remaining attentive to areas where there appeared to be a lack of fit and where existing categories seemed inadequate or overly generalised. In this way, both the data itself and existing knowledge was used as a guide in the development of new conceptual categories to fill in some of these gaps, and in the revision, refinement, extension and consolidation of existing understandings.

Conclusion

Having outlined the theoretical and methodological approach adopted in this study, the following chapters present findings from a series of investigations into meaning production within the American sitcom episode *Murphy's Revenge*, the wider context of its production in the United States in 1992, the context of its subsequent reception here in New Zealand, and participants' actual readings of it. As discussed above, this 'tripartite' approach reflects my central thesis that the role of American entertainment television in the social construction of motherhood' and 'the family' in New Zealand today cannot be determined without considering also the contexts within which such texts are produced and later read, along with the way in which they are received and understood by differently positioned audience members.

III

Putting the Text in Context: *Murphy's Revenge* and America's "Culture War"

Introduction

This chapter firstly addresses the macro context of this episode's production in the United States in 1992. It begins with a discussion of the controversy sparked by the then vice president Dan Quayle when he publicly criticised *Murphy Brown* for its 'glamorisation' of single motherhood, and then examines the wider historical, social, political, economic and cultural environment within which those assertions were made. The broader discursive context within which *Murphy's Revenge* was subsequently produced is also charted, along with the particular set of themes, concepts and statements around 'motherhood' and 'the family' offered by the three dominant voices structuring this debate. Taken together, it is argued that these different 'modes of talking' comprised the discursive 'pool' of potential accounts likely to be drawn on by the writers and producers of this episode in reconstructing the original event and subsequent debate, and in formulating what effectively constitutes a text-based rebuttal of the vice president's allegations. This textual response is examined in the second section, which analyses narrative structure and discursive negotiations in *Murphy's Revenge* in some detail.

Text in Context

'Murphygate'

The original controversy began in the wake of a speech made by vice president Quayle to the Commonwealth Club of California[1] on 19th May 1992, in which he referred to the previous evening's episode of *Murphy Brown* wherein Murphy had finally given birth to a baby boy (Martel, 1992). At the time, many Americans were still reeling in the aftermath of rioting which had raged through South Central Los Angeles following the acquittal on April 29th of five white police officers captured on videotape beating a Black man, Rodney King. Evidently, Quayle was prompted by these recent events to change the subject of his speech from relations between the United States and Japan to that of Hollywood's negative influence on social and moral values in contemporary America (Morrow, 1992a). Referring directly to the rioting in his address, Quayle stated "I believe the lawless social anarchy which we

saw is directly related to the breakdown of family structure, personal responsibility and social order in too many areas of our society" (Quayle, 1992, cited in Smith, 1995, p. 152). He also blasted the ethos of welfare dependency and proclaimed that

> [T]he failure of our families is hurting America deeply.... Children need love and discipline. They need mothers and fathers. A welfare check is not a husband. The state is not a father.... Bearing babies irresponsibly is, simply, wrong. (Quayle, 1992, cited in Morrow, 1992a, p. 46)

Quayle then went on to make his now infamous attack on *Murphy Brown*, CBS's highest-rating entertainment series (Benoit & Anderson, 1996):

> It doesn't help matters when prime-time TV has Murphy Brown - a character who supposedly epitomizes today's intelligent, highly-paid, professional woman - mocking the importance of fathers by bearing a child alone and calling it just another 'lifestyle choice'. (Quayle, 1992, cited in Yang & Devroy, 1992, p. A17)

Not content to limit his criticisms to this series alone, Quayle then extended his attack to "our cultural leaders in Hollywood, network TV, [and] the national newspapers" (Quayle, 1992, cited in Benoit & Anderson, 1996, p. 75).[2]

Significantly, Quayle is not the first political figure to cite the potentially negative social influence of Hollywood's liberal elite and the national media.[3] But whereas other attacks generated a relatively mild media reaction, Quayle's comments immediately provoked a media feeding-frenzy. His speech received coverage on all three television networks in the evening news of 19th May, and was the top story the next day (*Television News Index and Abstracts*, 1992, cited in Benoit & Anderson, 1996, p. 73). Reports were filed with titles such as "*Murphy Brown* Baby Issue Raised by Quayle" (*Inside Politics* CNN, 20 May, 1992) and "Politics and the Moral Message of *Murphy Brown*" (*Newsmaker Saturday* CNN, 23 May, 1992). Newspapers around the country picked up the story the following morning. *The New York Times* gave the story front page billing, as did the *Los Angeles Times* and *Washington Post.* Follow-up stories subsequently ran in these and many other papers, from the *Dallas Morning News* to the *Omaha World-Herald.* In all, the incident provoked a very considerable amount of editorial and journalistic reaction (see for example Berke, 1992; Garment, 1992; Lauter & Gertstenzang, 1992; Snortland, 1992; Torbar, 1992; Yang & Devroy, 1992).

The majority of this media coverage was negative and highly critical of Quayle's attempt to blame Murphy Brown, a fictional character in a programme he admits he doesn't watch, for America's many social problems (Benoit & Anderson, 1996). Those invited to comment also typically rejected his accusations (Ibid.). To a large extent, the media perceived Quayle's denunciation of *Murphy Brown* as yet another in a series of embarrassing incidents (some of which are referred to in the episode itself) and were quick to frame his remarks as a political gaffe destined to damage his already marginal credibility (Smith, 1995). Some even suggested it may have been a rather cynical attempt to improve his popularity, which was slumping before his Commonwealth Club speech (Goodgame, 1991).

Political opponents were equally swift to exploit the political mileage provided by Quayle's remarks. Andre Marrou (presidential candidate for the Libertarian Party) released a press statement arguing that

> The government should not interfere with a woman's right to choose her own lifestyle, including having a child out of wedlock.... Vice president Quayle is talking about *Murphy Brown* to distract attention away from the real issues - the longest recession since World War II, the growing budget deficit, the corruption in Washington, the still-awaited peace dividend, the need to bring our troops home from abroad, [and] the failure of our public education system. (Marrou, 1992, p. 1)

Political and media commentators highlighted the racist coloration of Quayle's implicit connection between solo motherhood, welfare dependency, and social disorder. Morrow (1992a) points out, for example, that Quayle was clearly referring to *Murphy Brown*'s possible influence on young, unmarried, black females in the ghettos. Pollitt (1992, p. 88) similarly notes that "the *Murphy Brown* debate...isn't really about Murphy Brown; it's about inner-city women, who will be encouraged to produce fatherless babies by Murphy's example - the trickle-down theory of values."

Those involved in producing this series were also quick to respond. Diane English, the creator and executive producer of *Murphy Brown*, answered Quayle's remarks with the comment "if the vice president thinks it's disgraceful for an unmarried woman to bear a child, and he believes that a woman cannot adequately raise a child without a father, then he'd better make sure abortion remains safe and legal" (English, cited in Morrow, 1992a, p. 46). Candice Burgen, who plays Murphy Brown in this series, also publicly expressed a contrary view to that of the vice president, maintaining that "poverty is contributing to an erosion of family values far more than

the media are" (Burgen, cited in Corliss, 1992, p. 49).[4] Quayle remained, however, initially unrepentant, and went on to make further critical comments of Hollywood and *Murphy Brown*, saying the show was "typical Hollywood...glamorizing something that is wrong with society" (Quayle, 1992, cited in Benoit & Anderson, 1996, p. 76).

While much of the media response was critical of Quayle's political motivations in raising the *Murphy Brown* issue, a number of commentators expressed agreement with his sentiments concerning single motherhood. *U.S. News & World Report* columnist John Leo (1992, p. 19), for example, described Quayle's attack as "a routinely cynical attempt to be seen strumming the 'family values' guitar in an election year". He did not, however, dispute Quayle's message that the rising number of single-parent families presents a major social disaster for contemporary America. Furthermore, his final remarks effectively reiterate the vice president's assertions regarding the complicity of Hollywood and the news media in promoting the disintegration of the traditional social order. Carlson similarly offers support for Quayle's claims:

> [The vice president] does have a point: having both a mother and a father is not some conservative affectation but an ideal to strive for. Coming into the world with one parent is a handicap, no matter how mature and moneyed the mother may be.... What is socially and emotionally acceptable to a woman may not be so to a child purposefully brought into the world with a hole at the center of his life where a father would be. (Carlson, 1992, p. 47)

Likewise, Bowman (1992, p. 22) praised Quayle for having "the guts to say what is statistically undeniable": that is, that the children of solo mothers "tend to be disproportionately dangerous social malcontents given to activities like rioting". And finally, columnist Mona Charen bemoaned the fact that "in a thousand ways, the *Murphy Brown* show snidely implies that only middle-American dunderheads believe you ought to be married before getting pregnant" (Charen, 1992, cited in Medved, 1992, p. 143). In terms of the on-going public reaction to Quayle's May 19th speech, the American Family Association came out in support of his position and decided to boycott sponsors of *Murphy Brown* (Electronic Media, 1992). Their response did not, however, reflect the views of the general population, with opinion polls registering an unfavourable response among the majority of Americans.[5]

The fact that Quayle's comments became so very contentious and sparked such a prolonged reaction[6] reflects something of the intensity with which these issues

continue to be negotiated in the United States. Early on in the process of conducting this initial survey, it became apparent that Quayle's comments were made and received within the context of a much wider debate over the nature and content of good 'family values', one that was clearly percolating well before the fictional Murphy Brown's fictional child was even conceived.[7] Furthermore, it became apparent that this highly-contested terrain encompassed a number of related issues, including single motherhood, welfarism, contemporary fatherhood, and the negative effects of family breakdown on children. Before outlining the key discursive voices within this on-going debate however, it is necessary to firstly examine the broader social, political, economic and cultural context within which it can, and should be, situated.

The Changing Face of America, 1970-1992

This context has been shaped by two decades of relative economic uncertainty as the post-war boomtime (1947-1973) came to a grinding halt, leading to a decline in real incomes, rapid inflation, and high interest rates which in turn plunged America into a deep recession (Spoonley, Jesson & Ryan, 1988; Hamamoto, 1989; Clarke, 1992). The political response to this economic crisis was largely informed by supply-side economics and sought to reduce central government and its traditional regulatory role, while simultaneously tightening the reigns on inflation and social spending (Levy, 1995; Wetzel, 1995). This combination of economic decline and monetarist social policies in turn led to a sharp increase in the gap between rich and poor in America (Shapiro, 1992; Levy, 1995).

But the declining economy was not the only source of social upheaval in these years. The end of the post-war boom also saw the end of the American public's unwavering faith in traditional forms of authority, in particular the government and the military (Hamamoto, 1989). The Kennedy assassination, the Vietnam War, Watergate and Irangate all provoked an unprecedented level of distrust in these once highly-esteemed institutions, most visibly embodied in the emergence of a youth-oriented counter-culture during the 1960s and 1970s (Peele, 1985; Hamamoto, 1989). Following in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement came further alterations to the social sphere brought about by the second-wave of the women's movement and its interrogation of patriarchal authority in the domestic and public realms, and later by the gay and lesbian rights movement (Ehrenreich, 1987; Clarke, 1992).

Alongside these changes, the 'sexual revolution' of the 1960s heralded the dawn of a new era of sexual and moral permissiveness expressed most visibly in a proliferation of pornography and an exponential increase in sexual references within mainstream

media texts (Ehrenreich, 1987). By the late 1980s, the American public was reeling as the HIV/AIDS epidemic began to take hold (Altman, 1986; Kirp & Bayer, 1992; Walker, 1992). Later, the Bush years would bear witness to the end of the cold war as the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union formally dissolved into constituent republics (Sobnosky, 1993). To many, it seemed that the 'enemy' no longer assumed a safely foreign disposition, as it had in the case of world communism. Rather, the enemy was now within, and took the more insidious form of a generalised moral decay evident to some in the rise of promiscuous sex, family disintegration, and welfare dependency (see for example Friedman & Friedman, 1984).

Within the political realm, the fall of East European communism had particular implications for the ruling Republican party, which lost one of its most potent sources of party and electoral unity (Dorrien, 1993; Sobnosky, 1993). In the vacuum created by the deprivation of this traditional moral counterweight, and within the context of a prolonged economic recession, national opinion became increasingly conservative and crystallised around a political movement known as the 'New Right' (Peele, 1985; Clarke, 1992). Indeed, the seeds of a populist right-wing politics had already been sown in the late 1960s, when lower-middle-class and blue collar constituencies reacted in protest against liberal initiatives such as school busing (Shor, 1986; Ehrenreich, 1987).

According to Clarke (1992), this conservative renaissance incorporated three main streams of thought: economic liberalism, neo-conservatism, and moral traditionalism. The latter was linked to a revival of Christian fundamentalism in the United States during this period, and was also associated with increased activism within a range of single issue lobby groups, such as the anti-abortion and anti-Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) movements (Peele, 1985; Spoonley et al., 1988; Hamamoto, 1989; Clarke, 1992). Tying these different strands together was a shared sense that American values were in crisis and, furthermore, that this moral breakdown was due to the attempt to intervene in the free-market economy, through programmes such as affirmative action and social welfare (Ehrenreich, 1987). The latter was regarded with particular disdain by the New Right, on the grounds that an overly generous welfare state would potentially undermine the work ethic of beneficiaries (Peele, 1985; Ehrenreich, 1987; Spoonley et al., 1988).

These strands were also united in the belief that the family remained the basic unit of society, and that an end to America's woes could only come through a reaffirmation of the traditional values of family, faith and flag (Hamamoto, 1989; Clarke, 1992). As part of its 'pro-family' emphasis, the New Right emphasised social issues such as

abortion, the ERA and school prayer (Peele, 1985; Ehrenreich, 1987). These issues soon became central to its populist appeal, reflecting some of the discomfort and anxiety generated by the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s and the social changes these engendered. In the eyes of the New Right, it seemed that only a return to traditional values could restore balance to a nation seriously out of kilter.

This new spirit of political and moral conservatism became most notably manifested in the Reagan Administration, under which close associations between religious and political leadership were forged (Peele, 1985; Spoonley et al., 1988; Hunter, 1991; Freeman, 1993). Indeed, it appears that cuts in social spending were at least partially grounded in the New Right's conservative family values ideology. Faced with increasing levels of poverty among children and a host of economic and social problems, the conservative response was to implement policies which 'reinstated' the family as the primary provider of health care and welfare benefits to individuals by decreasing the level of publicly-provided financial assistance (Hamamoto, 1989).

In spite of such initiatives, however, the rate of divorce continued to increase steadily, much as it had since the liberalisation of divorce laws in the 1960s and the consequent relaxation of the social stigma against unwed mothers (Ehrenreich, 1987; Jencks, 1993; McLanahan & Casper, 1995). By the late 1980s, the United States had the highest rate of teenage pregnancy among nineteen industrialised nations, with forty-one percent of young white women and sixty-three percent of non-white women experiencing at least one pregnancy before the age of twenty (Shapiro, 1992). By 1990, half of all marriages were ending in divorce (McLanahan & Casper, 1995; Hogan & Lichter, 1995). Equally dramatic social changes occurred as a steady stream of women continued to enter the work force during this period. By 1991, women made up just under half the paid work force at forty-six percent (Wetzel, 1995). Seventy-three percent of married women with school-aged children worked in 1990; as did fifty-nine percent of mothers with pre-schoolers (McLanahan & Casper, 1995). Of these women, twenty-eight percent worked full time (Hogan & Lichter, 1995).

These profound shifts within the social and cultural fabric have had a major impact on the composition of the American family. In the 1950s, the family typically consisted of a breadwinner-husband, homemaker-wife and children. By the 1990s, a greater diversity of family arrangements had emerged, with both parents often being engaged in paid employment, and with a far greater number of single-parent families (McLanahan & Casper, 1995). Twenty-eight percent of American families with dependent children were headed by a single parent in 1990 (Department of Statistics

New Zealand, 1991a, p. 52). Rates of single-motherhood have been particularly high among the African-American community - in 1990, just under thirty-eight percent of African-American children lived with both parents, compared with seventy-nine percent of their white counterparts (Census Bureau figures, 1990, cited in Medved, 1992, p. 145). And although nearly seventy-five percent of employed women who maintained families with children under eighteen years worked full time, including eighty percent of all divorced mothers,[8] rates of poverty remain highest amongst single-mother families (Wong, Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1993; Hogan & Lichter, 1995).

Largely due to its association with poverty, single motherhood has become the subject of considerable debate and research in the United States since the 1980s. Much of this debate and research has been spearheaded by individuals and organisations aligned with the New Right, and posits a causal relationship between single parenthood, poverty, and negative social and psychological consequences for children living in one-parent families, particularly when the parent is a never-wed mother. Children from one-parent families have, for example, been found to achieve less at school and get in more trouble more often, to have more psychological and behavioural problems, to be more likely to become teenage and single parents themselves, and to have more difficulty finding and keeping steady jobs as young adults than children from two-parent homes (Besharov, 1992; Dafoe Whitehead, 1993). The steady accumulation of findings such as these may go some way to explain why changes in family structure are reputedly received rather negatively by the majority of Americans (Family Research Council, 1993).

Discursive Positions In America's "Culture War"

It is clear from this discussion that the recent macro context of this episode's production was one of deep-rooted economic uncertainty and profound social change, generating in turn an intense political and cultural debate over the cause of, and solution to, America's contemporary malaise. Within this volatile setting, three discursive voices[9] can be seen as offering competing accounts of 'motherhood' and 'the family', and as engaged in an on-going struggle to assert their unique 'language' and underlying perspective within the public domain. These are, respectively, the discourses of liberal-humanism, the moral right, and communitarianism.

The Discourse of Liberal-Humanism[10]

The historical roots of liberal-humanist discourse lie in the writings of Kant, Locke, Mill and other enlightenment philosophers and writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Hunter, 1991; Bellamy, 1992; Frazer & Lacey, 1993; Daly,

1994; Galvin, 1994; Reiman, 1994). The contemporary American version of this discourse has also been very strongly inflected by the progressive spirit expressed in the Declaration of Independence, with its fundamental values of the equality of all men [sic] before God, 'justice and freedom for all', and 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' (Hunter, 1991; Frazer & Lacey, 1993). More recently, this liberal vision was articulated by presidents Johnson and Carter, and effectively underpinned the Democratic Administration's affirmation of social and political initiatives such as affirmative action and the ERA (Peele, 1985; Hunter, 1991; Clarke, 1992).

Grounding this discourse is a rejection of God as the ultimate and binding source of moral authority in favour of moral logic and reasoning, 'objective' scientific truth and subjective human experience (Hunter, 1991). Society is constructed as an aggregate of autonomous, self-contained and self-interested individuals, each with the inalienable right to pursue his or her own interests without undue interference from other people, the church or state (Bellamy, 1992; Frazer & Lacey, 1993; Delaney, 1994a; Peck, 1994). In these terms, a free society is conceived as one where individuals have the right to form their own beliefs and make their own moral judgements in accordance with their individual conscience (Hunter, 1991; Peck, 1994).

Drawing from these key premises, liberal-humanist discourse offers a construction of the family and human sexuality which largely severs their traditional associations with Judaic and Christian morality. Anthropological evidence is typically cited to demonstrate that modes of sexual expression, family structure and marital relations have all varied historically and cross-culturally according to human needs and circumstances (Hunter, 1991). In these terms, the patriarchal nuclear family is regarded, not as a natural or inevitable structure but rather, as the *dominant* structure within a quite specific cultural and historical context. Liberal-humanists consequently recognise that love relationships, and not just biological or marital ones, can form an equally legitimate basis for family organisation (Young, 1994). In terms of this discourse, it is the *quality* of family life that matters. On the basis of this assumption, reconstituted, single-parent and gay or lesbian families are said to be just as valid as the traditional patriarchal nuclear family. Liberals are thus typically opposed to policies and practices which discriminate against 'alternative' families, generally on the grounds that individuals should not be penalised from the outset by virtue of the family circumstances into which they are born (Hunter, 1991).

An anti-essentialist notion of gender difference is also central to the contemporary articulation of this discourse. Today, there is widespread acceptance within liberal

circles of a construction of gender traits and social roles as a *cultural* production, rather than a natural fact (Frazer & Lacey, 1993). Implicit in this construction is a repudiation of the notion that men and women are essentially different, in favour of a view of women and men as more or less the same by virtue of their shared humanity (Hunter, 1991). In terms of this discourse then, social qualities such as assertiveness and nurturance are not secured according to the biological sex of an individual, but rather, become ascribed to men or women through the processes of human socialisation (Hunter, 1991; Bryson, 1992; Frazer & Lacey, 1993). Hence, motherhood is understood to be a social role defined by a set of *learned* social skills and behaviours, rather than the natural expression of a biologically innate drive.[11]

Within the broader context of the "Murphygate" controversy, a liberal-humanist position on sexuality, family organisation and single motherhood is clearly evident in the response of one commentator to Quayle's remarks in which the key liberal principles of choice, individual autonomy, pluralism and inclusiveness are reiterated:

> [I]f people want different things from family life - if women...cite as a major reason for separation the failure of their husbands to share domestic labor; if both sexes are less willing to resign themselves to a marriage devoid of sexual pleasure, intimacy or shared goals; if single women decide they want to be mothers; if teenagers want to sleep together - why shouldn't society adapt? Society is, after all, just us. (Pollitt, 1992, p. 92)

Historically, liberal-humanist discourse has informed the policy imperatives of the Democratic Party. Its influence is clearly evident, for example, in the Democratic platform for the 1980 presidential campaign, which pledged support for "efforts to made federal programs more sensitive to the needs of the family, *in all its diverse forms*" (Hunter, 1991, p. 274-5; emphasis added). The Democrats' assimilation of feminist concerns during the 1980s is also evident in initiatives aimed at providing abortion services, ending sexual harassment and wife battering, and helping women manage their obligations at work and at home (Freeman, 1993). As the 1980 platform made clear, a Democratic Administration would have ratified the ERA and abortion rights, on the grounds that "reproductive freedom [is] a fundamental human right" (Hunter, 1991, p. 277). Somewhat surprisingly, however, research suggests that only eleven percent of Americans identified themselves as 'liberal' in 1988 (Ibid., p. 76).

Perhaps with some justification, therefore, conservative critics other than Dan Quayle have pointed to what they regard as a dangerous over-representation of liberal values within the sphere of cultural production, particularly Hollywood

(Coakley, 1977; Thomas, 1983; Gore, 1988; Medved, 1992). Indeed, numerous media representations of single-parent families would seem to be grounded in liberal-humanist discourse, and to articulate a liberal-feminist perspective on contemporary American motherhood and gender relations. Television sitcom, in particular, has a long history of representing the struggles and successes of single-mothers in series such as *Julia* (1968-1971), *One Day at a Time* (1975-1984), *Alice* (1976-1985), and *Kate & Allie* (1984-1988) (Hamamoto, 1989). Older single mothers also became more prominent on the small screen during the early 1990s (Medved, 1992). Obviously, *Murphy Brown*'s depiction of motherhood and the family needs to be situated within this more immediate context of the history of American television sitcom production.

The Discourse of the Moral Right

'The discourse of the moral right' refers here to the sets of themes, concepts and statements used to articulate the conservative morality shared by a range of religious traditions in America, including Orthodox Judaism, conservative Christianity, Catholicism and what some have described variously as the 'New Christian', 'Religious', or 'Evangelical' Right[12] (Peele, 1985; Hunter, 1991; Cromartie, 1993). Firmly grounded in Judaic and Christian doctrine, this discourse constructs a version of reality in which

> [T]he world, and all of the life within it, was created by God.... [T]he human species is differentiated into male and female not only according to genitalia, but also according to role, psyche, and spiritual calling.... [T]he natural and divinely mandated sexual relationship among humans is between male and female and this relationship is legitimate only under one social arrangement, marriage.... [and] the nuclear family is the natural form of family structure. (Hunter, 1991, p. 122)

As Hunter explains, the discourse of the moral right constructs men and women as essentially different from each other and as having different roles to play within society (see also Brink & Mencher, 1997). Women are thus viewed as 'naturally' suited to their God-given social role as mothers and caregivers, and are seen to have a natural maternal instinct and propensity for child care which ensures that the best person to look after young children is their biological mother (Wearing, 1984; Brink & Mencher, 1997). Men, on the other hand, are held to be 'naturally' suited to their public, social and familial role as leaders and decision makers. Hence the ideal mode of family organisation is one in which the husband is the income earner and provider, while the wife cares for their home and children (Hunter, 1991).

Equally central to moral right discourse is the proposition that the liberal permissiveness of the 1960s and 1970s has caused widespread social and moral decay in the United States, to the point where "crime and corruption are everywhere; the young defy the old; the family is in peril" (Ehrenreich, 1987, p. 163). Indeed, it seems that in the eyes of the religious right, America is in the midst of a 'culture war' over the meaning and substance of good social and moral values (Bruce, 1988; Hamamoto, 1989; Hunter, 1991 and 1994; Sobnosky, 1993). This idea was expressed by Pat Buchanan, a devout Catholic and Republican politician, in his address to the Republican Convention in 1992 (Freeman, 1993). Quayle, a born-again Christian, also ascribes to this view. Speaking to the Southern Baptists in June 1992, he claimed that the negative response to his criticisms of Hollywood and *Murphy Brown* showed that the electoral campaign had become "a war between traditional values and a cultural elite that mocks families, religion and patriotism" (Buchanan, 1992, cited in Rosenthal, 1992, p. A1). Later, his allegiance to this discourse was made more explicit:

> The cultural elites respect neither tradition nor standards. They believe that moral truths are relative and all 'life styles' are equal. They seem to think the family is an arbitrary arrangement of people who decide to live under the same roof, that fathers are dispensable and that parents need not be married or even of opposite sexes. They are wrong. (Ibid., p. A13)

As these remarks suggest, the key site over which America's 'culture war' is being waged is the family. Within moral right discourse, 'the family' is said to be naturally patriarchal and based around immediate marital and biological relations issuing from the holy state of matrimony (Hunter, 1991). Both premarital sexual relations and cohabitation are constructed as morally wrong, reflecting that greater significance is ascribed to the *structure* of the family unit than the quality of relationships within it. In terms of moral right discourse, liberal-humanism's pluralist ethos undermines the privileged status of the only mode of family life ordained by God (Ibid.).

The disintegration of this sacred social institution is causally linked within this discourse to a decline in respect towards moral authority; a respect traditionally instilled by this family unit, and in particular the father (Gould, 1990).[13] In these terms, father absence is constructed as the root cause of a host of evils, including poverty, violence, drug addiction, academic failure, teen suicide, teen pregnancy, unemployment, crime, and, according to Dan Quayle, the Los Angeles riots (Pollitt, 1992; Stacey, 1994). Within this discourse, "the negative effects of father absence

cannot be eliminated by increasing aid to single mothers. Dollars can't replace daddies" (Davidson, 1990, cited in Gould, 1990, p. 141).

According to the moral right, those responsible for bringing about the new era of permissiveness are the 'educated liberal elite' or intelligentsia, who "created the feminist movement, drove religion out of the public schools, abetted the civil rights movement, allowed our national defences to weaken, and launched the war on poverty" (Ehrenreich, 1987, p. 163). A large concentration of this elite group are held to reside in Hollywood, and moral conservatives have consequently staged a concerted attack on the culture industries (Ehrenreich, 1987; Bruce, 1988; Hunter, 1991). In addition to acting as a conservative watchdog for the media, moral right activists have vocally opposed liberal initiatives such as abortion on demand, the ERA, homosexual rights, and the liberalisation of pornography laws (Ehrenreich, 1987; Hunter, 1991; Sobnosky, 1993). Their shared agenda is to reaffirm the traditional American values of family, patriotism and morality; values which reigned supreme during the prosperous 1950s and early 1960s (Ehrenreich, 1987; Hamamoto, 1989).

As noted in the previous section, moral right discourse came to exert considerable influence within the Republican Party during the late 1980s and early 1990s (Freeman, 1993; Sobnosky, 1993). In exchange for the votes of moral conservatives, Reagan and later Bush permitted religious leaders such as Pat Robertson to exert considerable influence on policy formulation around issues such as sexuality and the family (Spoonley et al., 1988). Utilising their considerable leverage, these politicians soon secured the dominance of the Moral Right's 'family values' agenda within the Republican Party (Freeman, 1993). Outside official political channels, the discourse of the moral right is articulated within and through numerous special agenda organisations such as the Moral Majority, the Christian Coalition, People for the American Way, and the Religious Roundtable (Spoonley et al., 1988). Finally, it is significant that at the time of this episode's production, both 'televangelist' Jimmy Swaggart and Christian Right spokesperson Jim Bakker were in damage control mode following recent sex scandals. Their well-publicised indiscretions evidently created something of a leadership vacuum within the moral right, which Quayle may have attempted to fill in taking up the 'family values' mantra (Smith, 1995).

Communitarianism[14]

The roots of communitarian discourse lie in the community-based ethics of liberal philosophers such as Aristotle, Rousseau and Hegel, revealing a not insignificant historical association with liberal-humanist discourse (Bellamy, 1992; Frazer & Lacey, 1993; Daly, 1994). Unlike liberal-humanism, however, the recent popularisation of communitarian discourse began as recently as the 1980s, when a group of academics and researchers involved in various policy and research institutes embarked on a project to shape a national consensus on the nature and content of 'family values' (Peele, 1985; Spoonley et al., 1988; Stacey, 1994). Their work was intended to guide the Democratic Party in formulating the kinds of social policies that would win the acceptance of middle Americans (Stacey, 1994; Young, 1994). Toward this end, these 'new Democrats' or communitarians articulated a set of themes, concepts and statements for talking about the family and social change in America which effectively forged a middle ground between moral right and liberal-humanist discourses.

Underpinning their efforts was a collective disillusionment with the 'troubling legacy' of liberal-humanism. Like those on the moral right, communitarians construct a link between liberalism's core emphasis on individual rights and the decline in social cohesion. Excessive individualism, according to communitarian discourse, undermines people's sense of social responsibility and has negative repercussions for communities and society as a whole (Sandel, 1994; Dewey, 1994; Daly, 1994; Delaney, 1994b). Similarly, liberalism's emphasis on the right to divorce, seek self-fulfilment, be free from physical and sexual abuse, and be free from excessive burdens is seen to have displaced the family's traditional functions (Daly, 1994). Unlike the discourse of the moral right, however, contemporary communitarianism does not ground its claims in Judaic or Christian doctrine, but rather in the findings of social science research and what is constructed as common *monetary* sense (Hunter, 1991).

A wealth of research is thus drawn on to evidence the communitarian position that family breakdown has negative effects on children and the economy and is the primary cause of America's social ills. Besharov, for example, uses research findings to rationalise a fiscally-charged affirmation of marriage:

> There is good reason to be concerned about the condition of female-headed families. Almost half of all female-headed families with children under 18 have incomes below the poverty line.... [O]ut-of-wedlock births and divorces...impoverish hundreds of thousands of American families. The median

> income for female-headed families is about one-third that of intact families.... The relevant figures...are $13,348 for divorced black mothers and $16,334 for their white counterparts, compared to $7,411 for never-married black mothers and $9,816 for whites.... But much more than a divorce, an out-of-wedlock birth to a young mother seems to be a direct path to long-term poverty and welfare dependency. The economic consequences of our high illegitimacy rate seem beyond debate. (Besharov, 1992, p. 13-17)

Dafoe Whitehead, co-leader of a well-known communitarian think-tank called the Institute for American Values (IAV), similarly cites evidence from social science research to demonstrate that family break-ups are harmful to many children, frequently leading to poverty, poor academic achievement and crime, and that family diversity in the form of increasing numbers of single-parent and step-parent families dramatically weakens and undermines society.[15]

This position is fundamental to communitarian discourse, as is the perception that policy intervention is needed to protect the interests of children, restore families and communities to the centre of American life, make divorces harder to obtain and resurrect the traditional social stigma against single parenting (Stacey, 1994). Arguing that the American economy can no longer sustain the rising welfare bill, many communitarians call for a return to the nuclear family as the primary source of social support for its individual members (Ibid.). Like the moral right, they also seek a reaffirmation of the importance of fathers within the family unit, and point to research which demonstrates the importance of both parents to children's emotional well-being (Dafoe Whitehead, 1993). What differentiates communitarian from moral right discourse, however, is the way in which these assumptions are put into practice and articulated through policy initiatives. Unlike the moral right, communitarians are willing to offer a 'hand up' to poor families and advocate reforms such as flexitime, family allowances, and paid family leave for mothers and also fathers (Stacey, 1994). Furthermore, communitarians generally recognise that "strengthening family life in the, 1990s cannot and should not mean the repeal of the past thirty years of new opportunities for women in the workplace and in public life" (Blankenhorn cited in Stacey, 1994, p. 120).

Communitarianism has recently supplanted liberalism's traditional dominance with the Democratic Party, and is also associated with organisations such as the Progressive Policy Institute, the IAV (lead by Dafoe Whitehead and Blankenhorn) and the Council on Families in America (co-chaired by social scientists David Popenoe and Jean Bethke Elshtain). Being grounded in 'scientific' evidence, this

discourse carried considerable sway within the political sphere at the time *Murphy's Revenge* was produced in the United States in 1992.

Narrative Structure and Discursive Negotiations in *Murphy's Revenge*

As argued in chapter II, texts in the genre of television sitcom typically draw on competing discourses within the wider social world in order to contrast them for comic effect. Much is held to be at stake in the choices made by sitcom writers and producers in terms of the discourses they depict as absurd and contradict, and those they affirm. This seems especially true of the episode at the heart of this investigation, given the highly-contested nature of the subject matter it grapples with. In this case, it is clear that these choices were largely informed by the political allegiances of the creator and producer of *Murphy Brown*, Diane English, who concedes that Murphy's perspective is very much her own: "Murphy expresses a quite liberal point of view. It's also my point of view... [Murphy's] a dyed-in-the-wool Democratic liberal" (English, 1992, cited in Medved, 1992, p. 294).

Hence, it is not altogether surprising to find that this episode's rebuttal of Quayle's assertions effectively constitutes a liberal response to a critic well known for his morally conservative views and a series of embarrassing mistakes made during the course of his vice presidency. Having said that, the processes involved in constructing this liberal rebuttal are rather more complex than this immediate observation might suggest, and warrant rather more detailed examination.

As illustrated above, members of *Murphy Brown's* production team did offer public reactions to Quayle's speech at the time of the original controversy. However, their collective and penultimate response came later, in the form of the episode around which this study is based. This hour-long fall premiere aired in the United States on Monday 21 September 1992 under the rather telling name of *Murphy's Revenge*, suggesting that it was quite consciously positioned as a response to Quayle's assertions. That the American public were well aware of this intention is indicated by CNN's Jim Moret, who described the forthcoming episode as "perhaps the most-anticipated season opener since *Dallas* showed audiences who shot J.R." (*Showbiz Today* CNN September 18, 1992). And in the programme itself, Murphy is depicted coming to terms with new motherhood and the vice president's castigation of her, which is represented explicitly through the incorporation of actual television and print media news coverage of the original incident (see Figure 3), and through references made by the characters to the attack and media reaction to it.

Figure 3: Media coverage incorporated into *Murphy's Revenge*

Given these factors, it could be reasonably argued, as Benoit and Anderson (1996) have done, that this episode effectively constitutes a highly-politicised rhetorical defence against Quayle's allegations. On these grounds, it could also be argued that the most appropriate mode of textual analysis would examine this episode from a rhetorical perspective as persuasive discourse aimed at image restoration (Benoit & Anderson, 1996). However, a somewhat different mode of textual analysis has been adopted here - one which ascribes somewhat greater significance to this episode's generic identity, and which thus follows other theorists of television sitcom in considering the *way* in which this story is told and *what* is actually told. This section consequently begins by delineating the *structure* of this narrative in terms of its organisation of story elements, and then examines its *content*, specifically in terms of identifying the discourses articulated and juxtaposed within it for the purpose of generating humour. In order to elucidate the way in which one particular discourse comes to be privileged by the structure and content of this narrative, the nature and significance of the interactions that occur *between* these different discourses is also considered, as a necessary forerunner to the evaluation of this episode's potential ideological effectivity. Consideration of these issues is held to be of central importance to this project, given its premise that the formulation of this textual response will have very considerable bearing on audience receptions of it.

Narrative Structure

The following analysis of the narrative structure of this episode draws from Tzvetan Todorov's model of classic realist narrative.[16] Todorov describes classic realist narrative as beginning with:

> ...a stable situation which is disturbed by some power or force. There results a state of disequilibrium; by the action of a force directed in the opposite direction, the equilibrium is reestablished; the second equilibrium is similar to the first, but the two are never identical. (Todorov, 1977, p. 111)

In applying this definition to the genre of television sitcom, others have added that sitcom narratives typically trace the effects of this disturbance through to their resolution. This concluding moment (sitcom's 'happy ending') is held to defuse any threat posed by the conflict, resolve any internal ambiguities or contradictions generated by its exposition, and permit a restoration of the initial situational dilemma, albeit a somewhat superficial one (Cook, 1982, Curtis, 1982, Kuhn, 1985; Fiske, 1987).

This model of classic narrative structure can be usefully applied to *Murphy's Revenge* to understand the overall organisation of its different discursive elements. Briefly, the situation of *Murphy Brown* is typical of the genre and revolves around Murphy's work-based 'family' and the on-going relationship between this core but often antagonistic group of characters. The central character, Murphy Brown, is a highly successful news anchorwoman whose fierce competitiveness and sharp-wittedness are a frequent source of humour and conflict between her and her colleagues. Applying Todorov's model to the episode in question, the initial state of equilibrium is established in Scene 1, where Murphy is depicted as she was before all this 'baby business' entered the series - an attractive, competent and highly successful professional: liberal-feminism's ultimate career woman (Figures 4 and 5).

Figures 4 and 5: Initial equilibrium: Murphy arrives at the FYI office and is greeted with applause from her colleagues

This state of equilibrium is then disrupted or complicated by the re-introduction of Murphy's new baby in Scene 2, which can be seen to generate the following effects:

- Murphy expresses a pronounced lack of confidence in her abilities as a new mother (Scenes 2 and 3),
- she no longer has time for the personal grooming needed to maintain a 'professional' image (Scenes 3, 4 and 6),
- she embarks on a search for a new nanny, which proves unsuccessful (Scenes 3, 4 and 5),
- she breaks down and confesses to her colleagues that she feels unable to cope with the demands of motherhood (Scene 6).

These effects are then resolved by Frank in Scene 7, when he shows Murphy the most effective way to comfort her child. As she says, "This is the first time since I came home that I feel like I just might be about to do this. You are a life-saver".

At this moment of happy resolution, the threat posed by Murphy's lack of competence in her role as new mother to the overriding construction of her as a liberal-feminist icon is defused. In these terms, the possibility that Murphy might indeed be a failure as a mother cannot be sustained by the narrative and hence must be excised, since it potentially undermines the state of equilibrium upheld by this series - one which, it is argued here, suggests that women *can* successfully combine career and motherhood. This restored equilibrium, which is similar to and different from the initial status quo, is then immediately disrupted by a televised report of vice president Quayle's speech to the Commonwealth Club in Scene 7, in which he cites Murphy's status as single mother as an example of the poverty of values in American society. This second narrative disruption generates the following effects:

- Murphy, Eldin and her colleagues are shown to unwillingly bear the brunt of a media feeding frenzy (Scenes 7, 8-11, 12 and 13),
- Murphy's colleagues express contradictory views about her position as a single mother (Scene 12),
- Murphy becomes a virtual recluse under the guise of protecting her baby (Scene 13),
- Eldin criticises Murphy's mode of response (Scene 13).

These effects are then resolved as Murphy is convinced to fight back and does so by actively dealing with one reporter by emptying the diaper pail over his head, but more significantly by responding to Quayle's comments via her professional role as a

reporter in Scene 14. The initial state of equilibrium is thus restored, but in a reworked form, as Murphy reconciles her professional competence (which remains undisputed) with her emerging confidence in her abilities as a mother, via a mode of confrontational action that is privileged within the public sphere.

Discursive Negotiations

While crucial to a detailed understanding of the text/context/viewing nexus, it is argued that this analysis of narrative structure remains insufficient in light of Cook's (1982) insight that viewers can 'read' realist narratives simultaneously at the levels of structure and story content. Its sufficiency is problematised further given the complexity of comic enunciation in television sitcom, and still further by an acknowledgement of the social, political, economic, cultural and discursive context of this particular episode's production.

As discussed by Woolacott (1981 and 1986) and Palmer (1987), the operation of comic enunciation in television sitcom can be seen to produce numerous ways of referring to, or incarnating, discourses of the wider social formation. In the course of re-presenting and addressing issues around 'motherhood' and 'family values', *Murphy's Revenge* can be seen to invoke two oppositional discursive frameworks: liberal-humanism and that of the moral right. Communitarian discourse, on the other hand, is conspicuous by virtue of its *absence* in this episode, and appears not to have figured in the process of constructing a textual response to Quayle's assertions. While much of this episode's humorous effect derives from the way in which these two frameworks are brought together and contrasted within the narrative and dialogue, its comic appeal should not detract from an acknowledgement of what can be seen as a conscious attempt to participate in America's contemporary 'culture war' over the nature and definition of 'the family' and the moral values that this institution should, or should not, embody (Shiach, 1989; Medved, 1992; Dafoe Whitehead, 1993; Sobnosky, 1993). It is also evident that *Murphy's Revenge* is particularly explicit in setting a distinct agenda for public debates around these contemporary social issues.

It is perhaps not entirely surprising to note that this debate is articulated within the narrative context of an equally intense social and political struggle over the nature and meaning of 'femininity' and 'motherhood', given that 'the mother' forms a keystone of moral right discourse around the family. But while the 'family values' debate is an overtly public one and relatively well defined, that which is at stake in the discursive negotiation of 'femininity' and 'motherhood' is generally not so clearly articulated. The obvious exception to this is, of course, within contemporary

feminist theory, where it is widely recognised that this battle is being waged over and between *essentialist* and *non-essentialist* notions of gender (Fuss, 1989, Grosz, 1990).

In terms of this analysis, the first narrative cycle of *Murphy's Revenge* can be conceived as articulating a wider discursive struggle over the respective meanings ascribed to 'femininity' and 'motherhood' within the discourses of the moral right and liberal-humanism. The second narrative cycle similarly contrasts moral right and liberal-humanist notions of 'the family' and 'family values'. At various points within the narrative and dialogue of this episode, and with differing degrees of emphasis, the opposing 'sides' in these wider debates are articulated. Each is presented as offering a unique and competing mode of thinking and talking about these highly contested terrains - 'femininity' and 'motherhood' in the first instance, and 'the family' and 'family values' in the second. But while disparate voices can indeed be heard within this text, the process of comic enunciation works to generate a particular set of associations which effectively link 'old-fashioned' essentialist notions of gender with the discourse of the moral right and its traditional 'family values', and 'progressive' non-essentialist notions of gender with the liberal-humanist affirmation of diverse modes of family organisation. In the process, the former is cast as exterior to the liberal norm of *Murphy Brown*, while the latter comes to be affirmed as this episode's privileged discursive voice. The following analysis, then, considers the nature and significance of the interactions and juxtapositions that occur between these competing discursive frameworks as they are articulated through the dialogue, comedy, action and subject-positioning of the characters at four key textual moments; these being the points at which both narrative cycles are in turn disrupted and then subsequently resolved.

Learning how to 'mother'

The central underlying tension or enigma of the first narrative cycle (and indeed this *series* throughout the 'baby bearing' period) concerns the question: can Murphy successfully combine career and family? Implicit in this is a more fundamental dilemma concerning the question of the compatibility or irreconcilability of femininity and rationality. The centrality of this enigma is immediately established in the first two scenes, in which Murphy's demonstrated competence within the 'masculine' rational sphere of work is posed in stark contrast to her lack of ability and confidence within the 'feminine' sphere of home and family. This juxtaposition is initially presented in Scene 1 within the context of humorous dialogue as Jim, Frank, Miles and Corky learn of Murphy's pregnancy 'nightmare' and find the very possibility extremely amusing. Miles goes so far as to thank God it was "only a

dream", a remark which could be read as an intertextual reference to the prime-time soap opera, *Dallas*, which had begun a new season by reframing the previous one as a long and convoluted dream. While in this case Miles is soon proven wrong, the question is implicitly raised: has Murphy's excessive success within the 'masculine' sphere of work led her to vacate her 'natural' femininity?

I would argue that the assumption expressed here - that women who engage in non-traditional careers at some point mutate into hard-nosed 'she-men' - only makes sense in terms of an essentialist notion of gender, which later becomes more explicitly linked to the discourse of the moral right, as will be discussed below. While on the one hand asserting that differences in male and female social roles are the *natural* consequence of biological differences between men and women, the discourse of the moral right simultaneously proposes that these differences need to be constantly affirmed through the sexual division of labour. Obviously, this conservative imperative is contested by this series itself through its depiction of a professional woman making it in a 'man's world'. But it is also interrupted in the first scene of this episode, in which Murphy's alignment with the rational sphere is signified via reference to her professional success, which is then discursively linked within the dialogue to her possession of qualities such as egotism and competitiveness. Since these qualities are considered 'masculine' within moral right discourse, Murphy's public success is at this moment construed as a mode of masculinisation which makes the very possibility of her pregnancy (the embodiment of moral right notions of 'femininity') appear ludicrous, as reflected by the reaction of Miles, Frank, Jim and Corky to her pregnancy 'dream'.

This discursive juxtapositioning of rationality and femininity continues throughout this episode and is frequently exploited for its comic potential. It is particularly evident in Scene 2 where, in stark contrast to the confident career-Murphy depicted in Scene 1, we see the mom-Murphy out of her element and floundering. Linked to the previous scene by the sound of a baby crying, Scene 2 reconstitutes the first scene as Murphy's own dream or success fantasy. In these terms, the posited incompatibility between motherhood and career, or femininity and rationality, can now be read as a product of Murphy's own insecurities in her role as new mother, a reading which is confirmed in her soliloquy as she attempts to calm her baby (Figures 6 and 7):

Murphy: Look, you're going to have to give me a little more of a hint than this. Listen, I got these books, you see this one here, you're supposed to be sleeping for three hours at a stretch. It's written by an M.D. so I think a professional person just might know a little more about this sleeping business than you...

Figures 6 and 7: Murphy attempts to calm her baby through rational discourse

In an apparent attempt to elicit sympathy for her predicament, the narrative and discursive point-of-view positions the viewer 'with' Murphy in this scene through its use of soliloquy. At the same time, however, Murphy's reference to "professional persons" knowing more about "this sleeping business than you" effectively confirms the disjunction between the 'rational' public sphere and the private sphere of personal relations in which bodily needs and desires cannot be so easily rationalised away. This disjunction, along with Murphy's apparent alignment with 'the rational', is then reiterated in her quickly improvised song about "Mr Ducky-face" which she sings at the conclusion of this scene in an attempt to soothe her crying infant - a rather poor substitute for the conventional nursery rhymes which, in terms of moral right discourse at least, any 'good' mother would know.

It is at this highly contradictory point that the discursive orientation of this text begins to become clear. Given that, in terms of the state of equilibrium upheld by this series, it is untenable that Murphy might indeed be a 'bad' mother (she is, after all, the ultimate liberal-feminist heroine and therefore must, in the end, find a way of reconciling family and career), viewers who are familiar with the process of comic enunciation in television sitcom may recognise that the discourse of the moral right is in fact being 'set up' within the narrative in order to be later contradicted and exploited for its comic potential. That is to say, while it provides the *propositional* basis for an exploration of the supposed lack of fit between rationality and femininity (a juxtaposition which only 'makes sense' within its terms), we witness an emerging alignment of the narrative viewpoint with Murphy's *experience* of motherhood. This alignment increasingly works to undermine the idealised version of motherhood upheld within the discourse of the moral right and the commonsense 'truths' it validates, including the notion that the qualities traditionally associated with 'mothering' are instinctual or innate.

Indeed, this contestation is implicit from the outset, since the notion that femininity and rationality are incompatible is immediately called into question by the 'reality' that Murphy, a highly-successful reporter, *is* now in fact a biological mother. Her femininity is thus implicitly confirmed, yet her professional competence remains undisputed, which can be seen to generate something of a contradiction within moral right discourse by raising the possibility that these two 'incompatible' spheres are (at some point at least) reconcilable. In addition, alternative explanations for Murphy's lack of confidence in her abilities as a new mother are likely to be generated via the narrative point-of-view upheld by this text. For example, some viewers may reject the discursive construction of Murphy's 'failure' within the feminine sphere as a product of her 'masculinisation', perhaps in favour of explanations which reflect

their identification with Murphy's experience of new motherhood as confusing, frustrating and at times overwhelming.

At this point it is necessary to back-track momentarily to justify the above assertion that the essentialist notion of gender articulated in these two scenes should be read as textually aligned with the discourse of the moral right rather than any of a number of other discourses which assert an essentialist notion of gender.[17] Such an alignment is first expressed at the very beginning of Scene 2. Attempting to discern why her baby is crying, Murphy addresses him directly and asks "are you wet? Need to be changed? *Did you dream Pat Buchanan was hiding under your bed?*" Murphy's construction of Buchanan (identified above as a well-known political figure associated with the religious right in America) as some kind of childhood bogeyman implicitly articulates opposition to Buchanan's moral right discourse and the idealised version of 'motherhood' and 'family values' this discourse affirms.[18] This is the first explicit instance in which the producers of this text allude to the wider political context of this episode's production, and hints at the overt liberal-humanist critique of traditional 'family values' yet to come.

As discussed above, one of the core 'truths' of moral right discourse concerns the presence of a maternal instinct in new mothers. Implicit in the moral right's division of the world into masculine and feminine spheres is a mode of biological determinism which constructs empathy and nurturance as features of a 'natural' maternal response to young children. Throughout this episode, this assumption is repeatedly undermined in favour of an explanation which suggests that motherhood is something that women eventually get *accustomed* to, a position typically associated with the non-essentialist notion of gender affirmed within liberal-humanist discourse.

In this process, the association of these spheres with *sexual difference* can be seen to shift as we begin to see a reframing of the narrative in terms of this episode's privileged liberal-humanist voice. This voice begins to assert itself as the notion that women have a natural 'maternal instinct' which magically endows them with the emotional qualities suited to caring for young children is problematised in Scenes 3, 4, 5 and most notably, 7. As Frank shows Murphy how to successfully comfort her baby, the notion that such skills 'naturally' belong to women and 'the feminine sphere' is overturned, in favour of a construction of these skills as socially learned behaviours which men can also share (Figures 8 and 9):

Figures 8 and 9: Frank criticises Murphy's ineffectual efforts and takes over

Frank: Look, Murph, he's, he's never going to stop if you keep holding him like that.

Murphy: Oh, nice Frank, first you terrorise my child and then you blame me for it. What's wrong with the way I'm holding him?

Frank: Well nothing if he's the main course in a luau. Here, let, let me just, let me have him, let me have him. Come here, okay, shush, shush, shush... That's okay, Uncle Frankie's here, yeah, yeah.

Murphy: What is that Frank, where'd you learn to do that?

Frank: Hey, growing up in a family with seven kids, you pick up a few things.

However this reassertion of liberal-humanist discourse is not unproblematic, and is in some ways overturned as Frank goes on to explain that he once re-lived his own birth under hypnosis:

Frank: I'll never forget the sensation of those forceps. To this day, I can't use salad tongs.

Murphy: You know Frank, I'm beginning to understand why women rarely date you more than three times.

Here, Frank's experience of childcare and expressed sensitivity are in some sense re-coded by Murphy as *emasculating* via her suggestion that women find him unsuitable or undesirable as a mate. This coding of male sensitivity and involvement in the care of young children as emasculating only makes sense, however, in terms of a moral right construction of the subconscious, the primordial and the feminine *in opposition to* the sphere of masculine reason. This alignment is then undermined as the narrative rejects and displaces the terms of this dichotomous social order:

Frank: That's better, yeah, that's better. You see Murph, hold him out there in the breeze, he's gonna get scared. You gotta hold him in close, this way he feels secure. Oh, sometimes it's really great to just rest his head on your left side, this way he can hear your heart beat. Yeah.

Murphy: Wait a minute Frank, I want to write this stuff down. (Figure 10)

Figure 10: Murphy takes notes on Frank's parental technique

Murphy: Hold close, secure, heart beat. You're swaying, why are you swaying? And that patting business, what's that all about?

Frank: I don't know Murphy, you just do them, it feels right.

Murphy: Oh great Frank, you've got better maternal instincts than I do. (Writing furiously) Sway, sway, pat, pat, pat.

Frank: Look, Murph, would you stop writing this stuff down? You, you can't go at this like a reporter, you've got to just feel your way through it. Now come on, I want you to give it a shot.

Murphy: Oh no, no! You're doing fine.

Frank: Murph, you can do this, and sooner or later you're going to have to. Now come on, here you go, yeah. Yeah, okay, that's, that's not too bad. Now would you just relax, loosen up a little bit; he's not going to break. (Murphy bounces up and down vigorously). You, you may want to just slow that down a little bit, Murph, j-just a touch. It's, it's, it's more of a sway rather than a bounce.

Murphy: Oh geeze, I'm gonna give him baby whiplash. Aw Frank, this is so weird. You walk in the hospital alone and then two days later they send you out with a total stranger. Oh sure, they tell you he came out of your body, but after thirty-nine hours of labour, who remembers? They could have given me John Candy wrapped in a blue blanket and I wouldn't have known the difference! These are not maternal thoughts, Frank, but they're all I seem to be having.

Frank: You know Murph, if, if you'd just stop talking for a minute you might realise you're doing okay.

Murphy: Hey - how about that? Not a sound! I knew it, I killed him!

Frank: Murph, oh, he's sleeping. You see? You did it! I told you you could.

Murphy: Amazing! He's actually sleeping, in my arms! Oh, now this is more like it, oh yeah. You're a very good partner. You know Frank, this is the first time since I came home that I feel like I just might be able to do this. You are a lifesaver.

Like Eldin at an earlier point in the narrative, Frank is used to voice the idea that the qualities of empathy and nurturance are not fixed to particular biological bodies but rather, are learned social behaviours which are also desirable for men to engage in. And while Murphy's reference to her lack of "maternal instincts" is propositionally grounded in moral right discourse, the resolution of this cycle of the narrative in fact serves to displace this discourse - Murphy *learns* how to be a mother and by so doing demonstrates the liberal-humanist 'truism' that 'motherhood' is a socially learned activity, not a biologically-innate imperative (Figures 11-14).

Figures 11-12: Frank coaches Murphy on how to successfully comfort her child

Figures 13-14: Frank coaches Murphy on how to successfully comfort her child

Thus, we witness in this episode the emergence of a disassociation of 'femininity' and 'rationality' from biological sex and a repositioning of the narrative in terms of a ungendered public/private split. That is to say, the possibility is raised that Murphy's lack of competence within the private sphere may be due to her public orientation and the alienation from the realm of feelings and emotions that this sphere *itself* tends to engender, as opposed to an alienation from her 'essential' femininity. Her problem, as Frank puts it, is that she is trying to "go at this like a reporter". In these liberal-humanist terms, there *is* no essential femininity from which Murphy can be alienated; rather, there exists a pool of *human* qualities which individuals of either sex may possess to a greater or lesser degree.

Re-valuing the family

Just as Murphy's maternal insecurities appear to have been resolved by Frank's intervention and she finally has the opportunity to shower, a second narrative disruption occurs which effectively shifts the site of debate onto the contested terrain of 'family values'. In contrast to the presentation of the first cycle of the narrative (structured in terms of moral right notions of femininity and motherhood), the 'family values' debate is framed from the outset by a liberal-humanist critique of moral right discourse and its conception of the family unit in structural terms alone. Hinted at in Scenes 2 and 3, the rejection of these values is clearly articulated in Scene 7 as Frank and Murphy respond to a real-life news report of vice president Quayle's actual May 19th speech (Figure 15), in which he claimed that Murphy had glamorised single motherhood and mocked the importance of fathers by bearing a child alone and calling it just another "life-style choice":

Figure 15: Incorporated television coverage of former vice president Dan Quayle's Commonwealth Club speech, May 19th 1992

Murphy: Glamorise single motherhood? What planet is he on? Look at me Frank, am I glamorous?

Frank: Of course not, you look disgusting.

Murphy: You're damn right, people in prison get to shower more often than I do. And what was that crack about 'just another "life-style choice"'?

Frank: Murph, take it easy, the baby....

Murphy: I agonised over that decision, I didn't know if I could raise a kid by myself.

Frank: I know, I know!

Murphy: I worried about what it would do to him. I worried about what it would do to me! I didn't just wake up one morning and say "oh gee, I can't get in for a facial, I might as well have a baby"!

Frank: Look, I don't blame you for being angry but consider the source! I mean, this is the same guy who gave a speech at the United Negro College Fund and said "what a waste it is to lose one's mind". And then he spent the rest of his term showing the country exactly what he meant. Look, tomorrow he's probably going to get his head stuck in his golf bag and you'll be old news.

Murphy: But he said....

Frank: Murph, it's Dan Quayle. Just forget about it.

Epitomising the moral right view of the family as properly patriarchal and nuclear, Quayle's comments are constructed within the narrative of *Murphy's Revenge* as factually erroneous. As Murphy reiterates that which this episode is clearly intended to demonstrate, her lived experience of motherhood is far from glamorous, and regular viewers will recall that Murphy's decision to continue with her unplanned pregnancy was certainly not one she took lightly. Within the dialogue between Murphy and Frank in this scene, Quayle's remarks are constructed as the ramblings of a public figure severely lacking in credibility - as that of someone who has 'lost his mind' - and furthermore, as *alien* in terms of the liberal-humanist allegiance of this series - "*What planet is he on?*". Prolonged applause, cheering and whistling as Frank remarks "it's Dan Quayle. Just forget about it" confirm the live audience's appreciation of the overtly political denunciation of Quayle as a politician and by extension, the traditional 'family values' with which he is inevitably associated in the minds of the American public.

This contestation of moral right discourse is reiterated in Scenes 12, 13 and most significantly, 14, as Murphy responds to Dan Quayle's criticisms via her professional role as a reporter (Figure 16):

Figure 16: Murphy responds to Quayle's assertions via her professional journalistic role

Murphy: While some might argue that attacking my status as a single mother was nothing more than a cynical bid of election year posturing, I prefer to give the vice president the benefit of the doubt. These are difficult times for our country, and in searching for the causes of our social ills, we could choose to blame the media, or the Congress, or an Administration that's been in power for twelve years, or, we could blame me.

Here, Quayle's comments are framed as an example of political game-playing engineered to provide appealing yet simplistic 'causal' explanations for complex social problems and so take the heat off the administration of which he is part. Having established the absurdity of blaming single mothers for the breakdown of Western civilisation, Murphy goes on to critique Quayle's definition of family values and reassert a liberal-humanist definition of the family in terms of affective relationships:

Murphy: Unfortunately, it seems that for him the only acceptable definition of a family is a mother, a father, and children. And in a country where millions of children grow up in non-traditional families, that definition seems painfully unfair. Perhaps it's time for the vice president to expand his definition and recognise that whether by choice or circumstance, families come in all shapes and sizes, and ultimately, what really defines a family is commitment, caring and love. With that in mind, I'd like to introduce you to some of the people who might not fit into the vice presidents' vision of a family, but they consider themselves families none the less. (Murphy gets up and starts walking over to a group of adults and children standing nearby) They work, they struggle, they hope for the kind of life for their children that we all want for our children, and these are the people we should be paying attention to. Welcome to FYI. Would you introduce yourself please? (Figures 17-19).

Figures 17-19: Murphy invites a group of single parents to introduce themselves to viewers

Within the context of the narrative, this affirmation of the liberal values of inclusiveness, tolerance and understanding clearly signifies an attempt to *normalise* alternative modes of family organisation and alleviate the social stigma attached to the children of single parents. The fact that this overtly political discourse is enunciated by Murphy, the star of this series, via a mode of direct address uncharacteristic of sitcom but consistent with her fictional role as a news anchorwoman, strongly suggests that this discourse constitutes the privileged authorial voice of this text.

The resolution of this second narrative cycle permits a definitive resolution of the first as femininity and rationality are finally reconciled in Scene 15, but not without re-visiting one persistent contradiction. As Murphy comforts her son later that night, she relates her success in a way which reasserts the notion that 'the public' and 'the private' comprise separate spheres of being which imply different modes of action and behaviour (Figure 20):

Murphy: You've got to give me a little credit. Mommy was a total professional today. That's right, mommy took the high road, and mommy hates taking the high road. But that's what we do, when we're on the air, but off the air, that's a different story.

Figure 20: Later that night, Murphy successfully comforts her son

What does shift in this process, however, is the association of these spheres with sexual difference. That is to say, the narrative resolution finally affirms the liberal-humanist truism that women can act within both spheres of what is reconstructed as an *ungendered* split between public and private life. Thus, Murphy can indeed 'do both' - she can successfully combine family and career *because* femininity and rationality are not incompatible after all - but she must still retain a separation between these two aspects of her life.

Privileging Liberal-Humanist Motherhood and Subjectivity

According to Fiske (1987), the ideological *content* or privileged discursive voice of a narrative can be discerned by firstly comparing the opening and closing states of equilibrium, and secondly identifying what are shown to constitute the forces of disruption and stability. In terms of the analysis presented above, the initial stasis is one in which Murphy's professional success is reinforced and quite literally applauded. Similarly, at the point of narrative closure Murphy congratulates herself for responding to Quayle in a 'professional' manner via her role as a reporter, which is juxtaposed with her initially passive and 'irrational' response - that of self-seclusion. In these terms, the cycle of the narrative works to affirm a liberal-humanist construction of subjectivity in which participation within the public sphere is privileged, as is a mode of interaction grounded in rational debate. Since this mode of subjectivity is attributed to this programme's female protagonist, Murphy, the affirmation of liberal-humanism's rational subject is articulated here alongside and through liberal-*feminist* discourse, since it implicitly assumes that this mode is as available to women as it is to men.

In terms of the second aspect of this process, Murphy's claim on rational subjecthood is threatened by, firstly, a baby, and later, an agent of moral right discourse. Both these forces disrupt or complicate her claim by way of constructing a contradiction between femininity and rationality which the narrative must reconcile in order to restabilise itself. In the case of the baby, this contradiction is articulated via references to Murphy's lack of competence within the 'feminine' sphere and similarly, her *irrationalisation* as she becomes increasingly embedded within it. In the case of Dan Quayle's reference to Murphy "mocking the importance of fathers by bearing a child alone", the discursive opposition between 'the feminine' and 'the rational' is again evident in the notion that men and women have distinct and untranslatable roles in childrearing.

These disruptions are resolved through recourse to a construction of nurturance as a *social* (as opposed to *natural*) behaviour, and hence *not* an innate quality in women.

The discursive orientation of this programme is then finally confirmed in Murphy's 'televised' response to Quayle's comments, in which a liberal-humanist notion of 'family values' is accompanied by a discursive normalisation of alternative modes of family organisation. Thus, the affirmation of liberal-humanist discourse as Murphy comes to acknowledge its essential 'truth' effectively constitutes the force which overcomes both elements of disruption and restores the integrity of the narrative status quo.

Ideology and 'effectivity' in *Murphy's Revenge*

The equilibrium of realist narratives such as this one is usually understood as one which reproduces the values of the current social order, which are largely taken for granted and hence presented only indirectly in terms of their disruption (Fiske, 1987). This understanding has engendered various theories concerning the nature and operation of sitcom's apparent ideological 'effect'. According to Eaton (1981b), Cantor (1987 and 1990), and Neale and Krutnik (1990), the effectivity of sitcom is secured, not at the point of narrative closure, but more progressively as the narrative affirms a particular version of 'normality'. In their view, sitcoms pull issues of deviance into the familiar arenas of family, sexuality and employment by setting up violations of accepted social norms and repositioning them as transgressive, thus aligning the viewer with what the producer assumes are commonly-held interests, values and standards of acceptable behaviour. Cantor (1987 and 1990), for example, argues that sitcoms instruct viewers as to the values, beliefs and modes of conduct that are appropriate within the Western cultural order, and in so doing help maintain and reproduce the existing social hierarchy of power and authority. Importantly, this alignment with cultural norms is held to arise via the construction of an implicit dichotomy between those values and behaviours which fall 'inside' these cultural norms, and those which fall 'outside' them. Eaton (1981b) contends that once these oppositional behaviours and values are positioned as exterior to the norm and hence deviant, they can be safely marginalised, rendered absurd and even threatening, and finally comically scapegoated according to the requirements of the narrative.

In many ways, this can be said of *Murphy's Revenge.* As the above analysis demonstrates, this episode constructs a dichotomy in which liberal-humanist definitions of 'femininity' and 'motherhood', 'the family' and 'family values', are depicted as more reasonable, more equitable and more desirable than those of the moral right. In this process, moral right meanings and values (along with those who profess them) become objects of comic derision in a way which serves to confirm their position as deviant outsiders in terms of the liberal norm of *Murphy Brown.* What cannot be so easily said, however, is that this episode secures some kind of

ideological *effect* in terms of reproducing the values, beliefs and behaviours needed to uphold and maintain the existing hierarchy of power and authority within different national viewing contexts. In the case of *Murphy Brown*, these countries will typically be politically democratic, economically 'free-market' to varying degrees, and underpinned by liberal-humanist notions of individualism, equality and meritocracy. While it is certainly the case that *Murphy's Revenge* reifies these values, the question of ideological effectivity is a complex one which remains purely hypothetical in the absence of any investigation into the actual interpretations made by viewers of this text.

However, given this ideological content or privileged discursive position, it *is* possible to deduce something of the nature of the viewer that is *implied* by this text, although this bears no automatic relation to actual viewers. The privileged discursive voice of *Murphy's Revenge* implies a liberal viewer who shares the political perspective of the programme's creators in terms of opposing conservative social and moral values; one who is also able to identify, or at least sympathise, with Murphy as she grapples with new motherhood and public criticism. Since this episode primarily depicts Murphy's own experience as a new mother and career woman, the implied viewer is also someone for whom the question "can women successfully combine career and family?" is likely to be of interest, relevance and perhaps even concern.

This profile is supported by a 1992 Nielsen Media Research report of viewership in the United States, in which *Murphy Brown* was in fact found to rate particularly well among college-educated, higher-income women and in households headed by professional/managerial individuals (Mandese, 1992). Of course, it cannot be presumed that this programme's *actual* audience will comprise only those implied by the text. After all, the same Nielsen Media Research report indicated that *Murphy Brown* enjoyed a broad appeal across all demographic groups, and was merely particularly strong among those identified above. And if, as Morley (1986) suggests, viewing typically takes place within a family context, whole families may watch *Murphy Brown* regardless of the fact that they are not members of its intended or implied audience.

Conclusion

This likelihood reinforces a point stressed in chapter II, and that is the need to remember that differently positioned viewers will always be able to interpret an episode such as this one in ways other than that suggested by its privileged discursive voice. This ability is to some extent facilitated by the episode itself, which is, to a (limited) degree, multi-vocal in the sense of simultaneously 'speaking' on a range of

issues. While the above analysis downplays this multi-vocality, the intertwining of storylines and themes within sitcom narratives comprises a formal feature of their articulation which inevitably bears on the readings that can be made of any particular scene or event. In necessarily limiting the scope of my analysis to the interaction of discourses which 'speak' about 'femininity', 'motherhood', 'the family' and 'family values', I have effectively used a predetermined set of 'clues' with which to reconstruct this text in a way which reflects my own theoretical and personal interest in the discursive construction of those objects. By doing so, it was not my intention to preclude the possibility that certain viewers will be more strongly influenced by those other discursive voices which invariably pervade and surround this episode. On the contrary, I want to suggest that viewers may potentially draw on these discourses *as well as* bringing their own discursive competencies and social group memberships to the interpretive process. Since these discursive competencies and allegiances are undeniably formed within a wider social, economic, political, cultural and discursive context, questions must be raised as to the ways in which New Zealand viewers derived meaning from this episode, produced as it is in the United States and replete with specific references to its very different social and political milieu.

Indeed, this episode seemed to hold particular significance for many American viewers, and was the most widely watched event of the 1992 United States electoral campaign with approximately forty-four million viewers[19] tuning in (Kolbert, 1992). *Murphy's Revenge* won CBS top ratings for the first week of the new season (*Broadcasting,* 1992), and received additional media coverage and editorial comment. Candice Burgen featured on the cover of *Time* (1992), and stories about the episode were printed in the *Los Angeles* and *New York Times* (Braxton & Broder, 1992; Kolbert, 1992). In addition, the *New York Times* subsequently ran a four-part cover series entitled 'The Good Mother', highlighting the "complexity, diversity and confusion of being a mother in 1992" (Chira, 1992, p. 1).

In New Zealand, however, this episode's transmission was hardly cause for comment, although the *New Zealand Herald* did feature a story entitled 'Murphy Brown serves Quayle a hot potato(e)' on the morning of its broadcast (Graham, 1993). Given that the New Zealand media carried comparative little coverage of the original incident or its wider political context, what would viewers in this country make of the discursive position upheld by this episode? What significance would this episode have for them, and what role might it play in the process of discursive negotiation around 'motherhood' and 'the family' in New Zealand today, given that much of its meaning is defined through reference to political figures such as Pat Buchanan and Dan Quayle (of whom New Zealanders may know very little) and

given also that it clearly refers to a much wider debate within the United States around family values and the 'problem' of single motherhood?

To posit the same questions somewhat more theoretically, how would this programme be made sense of within the very different social, political, economic, cultural and discursive context that is contemporary New Zealand? What would the New Zealanders involved in this research 'do' with the absences or gaps that must inevitably emerge in this text when it is read outside the context of its original production? In light of these and other concerns, it is clear that an empirical examination of the actual receptions and interpretations made by the participants in this study is necessary if we are to understand the complex processes involved in shaping New Zealanders' receptions of this and other American television programmes. This in turn constitutes a necessary precursor to understanding the role of American entertainment television in the social construction of 'motherhood' and 'the family' in New Zealand today. Before such an investigation can proceed, however, some degree of insight into the macro context within which these local receptions and negotiations would take place is firstly required, along with some understanding of the relevant discourses circulating within that shared environment, since these would likely comprise the stock of interpretive resources potentially accessible to participants in making 'local' sense of this foreign production.

IV

The New Zealand Viewing Context

Introduction

The chapter presents the findings of a 'cultural trawl' of the macro social, political, cultural, economic and discursive context within which the participants in this study encountered *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* in New Zealand in 1995. It firstly outlines some of the relevant cultural experiences and knowledges potentially available to participants in making sense of this American sitcom episode, and then identifies four of the more prominent discourses circulating within that wider environment. These competing frameworks are understood as providing alternative ways of reconstituting the events, conflicts and debates depicted in *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* within this different national context of reception. Hence, their identification comprises an essential precursor to an analysis of New Zealanders' receptions of the agenda and content of this American sitcom episode. In turn, such analysis potentially offers considerable insight into the role of American entertainment television in the discursive construction of 'motherhood' and 'the family' in New Zealand today.

The Changing Face of New Zealand: 1970-1995

Over the past twenty-five years, this small pacific nation has undergone an accelerated process of massive structural change within its political and economic spheres. Many of these alterations comprised a discursively-driven response to a raft of economic difficulties following the loss of New Zealand's primary overseas market for lamb, beef, wool and dairy produce as Britain joined the European Economic Community in 1972, closely followed by the oil shock of 1973 (James, 1989; Boston, 1992; Kelsey, 1993; Kelsey & O'Brien, 1995). In the years that followed, New Zealand's once robust economy gave way to spiralling internal and external debt, economic stagnation, high inflation and growing unemployment,[1] leading some to argue that the nation could no longer sustain its hefty and ever-increasing welfare bill (Boston, 1992). In certain quarters, radical liberal market reform and a tightening of the fiscal belt came to be regarded as New Zealand's only hope of economic salvation (Spoonley et al., 1988; Kelsey, 1993).[2]

By the time the National Party returned to the helm in 1990, proponents of this 'free market' discourse had effectively attained a strangle-hold over economic, and, increasingly, social policy in this country. The then Minister of Finance, Ruth Richardson, initiated widespread reform of New Zealand's social welfare system on the pretext of promoting greater 'self-reliance' and increasing the incentive to seek work and attain economic self-sufficiency (Bunkle & Lynch, 1992; Else, 1992; Kelsey, 1993; OECD Economic Surveys, 1993; Kelsey & O'Brien, 1995).[3] Most significantly perhaps, the 1991 Budget reduced benefits to widows and recipients of the Domestic Purposes Benefit (DPB) by as much as sixteen percent in some cases, and slashed most other benefits by as much as twenty-five percent, with the stated aim of increasing "the 'rewards' for moving from welfare to work" (Richardson, 1991, cited in Kelsey, 1993, p. 83; see also Kelsey & O'Brien, 1995). Radical reforms were similarly implemented in the sectors of health, housing, education, accident compensation, and employment (Walker, 1989; Kelsey, 1993 and 1995; Campbell, 1995b).

By late 1992, official sources claimed that the worst was over and the economic 'recovery' was underway. Critics, however, pointed to the considerable social costs of New Zealand's economic 'revolution' and argued that the pace of this economic restructuring had brought hardship, disruption and anxiety to many New Zealanders, particularly Maori[4] (Ward, 1991; Boston, 1992; Kelsey, 1993; Kelsey & O'Brien, 1995). Voluntary agencies reported a huge increase in demand for food parcels and clothing during this period, and growing numbers of people became unable to meet rental and mortgage payments (Boston, 1992; Kelsey & O'Brien, 1995).[5]

Due both to the harsh new economic climate and changing expectations about living standards, families became more and more reliant on two incomes throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Increasing numbers of women subsequently entered the paid labour force,[6] generating in turn an expanded demand for childcare. The provision of such care did not, however, grow in step with that inflated need. Waiting lists for kindergartens and childcare centres remain long, and the number of places available for children under two years of age is often limited (Kedgley, 1996). In addition, the cost of childcare remains high, placing it beyond the financial resources of many middle to low income families. It is, therefore, no coincidence that thousands of 'latchkey' children continue to return home from school to an empty house (Hubbard, 1994). Indeed, children 'home alone' became the subject of something of a moral panic[7] during the period of this study, fuelled by the tragic death of four year old Dylan Hoeta, who had been left unsupervised by his parents and later died in a South Auckland caravan fire in July, 1994.[8]

The New Zealand family also underwent significant change during this period with the emergence of a greater diversity of family structures. By 1991, the traditional nuclear family of mum, dad and kids comprised only thirty-five percent of all families, compared with two-thirds in 1971 (Department of Statistics, 1991a). According to 1991 census figures, sole parent families were the fastest growing category of family at twenty-four percent (Ibid.). Divorce or separation was the main cause of sole parenthood, although twenty-nine percent of sole mothers had reportedly never been married. This figure is on the increase, as is the rate of sole fatherhood (Ibid.). Of all sole parents in New Zealand, forty-three percent participate in the paid labour force, yet the Median Annual Income of sole parent families in 1991 was just $15,900, compared with $45,000 for two-parent families (Ibid.). Single parenthood is also ethnically stratified. 1991 figures indicate that forty percent of Maori children live with only one parent, compared with twenty-eight percent of Pacific Island and fifteen percent of Pakeha children. According to the Department of Statistics, the trend toward solo parenthood has important implications for the welfare of children "given that sole parents tend to be disadvantaged in terms of employment, income, education and housing when compared with partnered parents" (Department of Statistics, 1995, cited in *NZH* 9.5.95, p. 20). More recently, local researchers have linked solo parenthood to a greater likelihood of juvenile offending, cannabis abuse, and behavioural and self-esteem problems (Kedgley, 1996).

In view of such findings, it is not altogether surprising that solo motherhood remains a significant site of discursive contestation in New Zealand today. Acknowledgement of the very real hardships often faced by women raising children on their own has often been occluded, however, by widespread and generally negative public perceptions of solo mothers on the DPB in particular. As noted by Dann and Du Plessis (1992), Milicich and Ryan (1993), and Kedgley (1996), these mothers have long been stigmatised as selfish and irresponsible 'welfare bludgers', 'incompetent mothers' and even 'moral pariahs'. Following its inception in 1973, the DPB quickly came to be viewed in official quarters as undermining marriage and offering a financial incentive for women to bear and keep their out-of-wedlock babies (Kedgley, 1996), a perception which apparently 'justified' an increasingly intrusive level of surveillance of beneficiaries during the mid 1970s. More recently, noted political and business figures have again targeted women on the DPB for criticism, with M.P. John Carter publicly describing these mothers as "legitimised prostitutes" and "social welfare leeches" (Carter, cited in Ibid., p. 315). As noted by Milicich and Ryan, despite the fact that recipients of the DPB in fact comprise around twelve percent of the total number of welfare dependants in this country, they are "continually regarded by society as being

the biggest drain on the welfare system and the most irresponsible group in society" (Milicich & Ryan, 1993, p. 97).

At the same time, however, social acceptance of solo parenthood itself appears to be on the increase. According to a *Listener*/Heylen Monitor, while sixty percent of New Zealanders believed that children needed to have both parents in the home in order to grow up happy in 1994, this figure represents a marked decline from the sixty-nine percent who reportedly believed this in 1985 (*NZL* 5.11.94, p. 13). Gender differences are also clearly evident, as only half of the female respondents thought this was the case - down from sixty-five percent in 1985. Class differences were also evident, with fifty-three percent of those in the lowest socio-economic group believing children fared best with both parents, compared with sixty-five percent of those in the highest group.

These sorts of findings reflect a general shift in the attitudes of many New Zealanders toward a number of activities previously considered socially undesirable. Attitudes toward working mothers, for example, have changed considerably in recent years. Mothers who worked outside the home were once widely condemned as 'selfish' and 'bad' for having 'abandoned' their children, a notion grounded in theories around maternal deprivation popularised by such enormously influential texts as Dr. Benjamin Spock's (1946) *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* and John Bowlby's (1953) *Child Care and the Growth of Love* (Kedgley, 1996). Both of these male 'experts' promoted an idealised construction of the 'good' mother as physically and emotionally available to her children "day and night, seven days a week, 365 days a year" (Bowlby, 1953, cited in Ibid., p. 178). Furthermore, both suggested that the absence of a full time, warm and intimate relationship with their mother could lead to psychological damage in children.

These theories have informed a popular perception in New Zealand that good motherhood effectively requires maternal self-sacrifice, a notion which persisted well into the 1970s. This belief prompted a heavy dose of guilt and anxiety among those mothers who, out of choice or necessity, engaged in activities which kept them apart from their young children for any length of time, and similarly underpinned adverse public reaction to married women with children who returned to the paid labour force during the 1960s and early 1970s (Ritchie, 1993; Kedgley, 1996).[9] Today, however, only slightly more than half of New Zealanders feel that pre-school children suffer if their mother works, while fewer (forty-four percent) believe the family suffers when a woman had a full-time job (*WT* 1.3.95, p. 11). Most generally support the idea of mothers working once children are at school, and fifty-five percent of New Zealanders

believe a working mum can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work (Ibid.). Most also feel it is acceptable for men to stay at home with pre-school children while women go out to work, although only four percent of men actually do so, compared with sixty-one percent of women (Ibid.).

Talking About 'Motherhood' and 'the Family' in New Zealand

It is evident from the above discussion that the recent macro context of this episode's New Zealand reception has been marked by fundamental alterations within the economic, political and social spheres. Within this context of rapid change and relative uncertainty, four discursive voices have been engaged in an on-going struggle to assert their particular meanings around 'motherhood' and 'the family' within the public domain, these being the discourses of the economic new right, liberal-humanism, the moral right, and child-centred discourse.[10]

The Discourse of the Economic New Right[11]

As noted above, market liberalism (hereafter referred to as the discourse of the economic new right) clearly became the dominant voice within New Zealand's political and economic realm during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Historically grounded in the classical liberalism of 17th Century philosophers such as Hobbes, the contemporary expression of this discourse is inflected by a Randian notion of independence (Spoonley et al., 1988), and a form of social Darwinism (Lauder, 1990). Classical liberalism constructs human beings as 'possessive individuals', or the owners of themselves and their own capacities. Defined as essentially rational, competitive and autonomous, individuals are held to be 'naturally' motivated to secure their own best interests by accruing status, power and material wealth[12] (Lauder, 1990; Bunkle & Lynch, 1992; Price, 1994).

According to the economic new right, the ideal society is thus one in which the market place provides free and open competition for jobs and resources, while leaving the family to fulfil its traditional obligations in caring for dependent family members (Else, 1992). At the same time, the family is effectively redefined in terms which simultaneously reflect both the pluralistic spirit inherent in the liberal origins of this discourse, and an overriding concern with promoting greater reliance on self and family, as the following policy statement reveals:

> The new policy direction demands a core family test of need to encourage family responsibility for individuals before the state accepts responsibility. The core family has been defined as any of the following: single adult with no dependent

> children; sole parent with children; a couple with no dependent children; or a couple with children. (Shipley, 1991, p. 17)

The economic new right argues that Government should support this source of 'social cohesion' by leaving care-givers and those supporting them alone, allowing the family unit to get on with its traditional job of supplying those essential goods and services not provided through the market place (Else, 1992). And while family breakdown is of serious concern due to its long-term social cost, the discourse of the economic new right asserts that the State should avoid picking up the financial loss incurred to individuals as a result of family dissolution, since this effectively undermines the efforts of individuals, their families and the market place to become more fully self-reliant (Ibid.).

In terms of its construction of motherhood, the economic new right claims to recognise the important contribution made by those who undertake unpaid child care and voluntary community work "to the health of society and the long-term viability of the economy" (Treasury, 1987, cited in Ibid., p. 243). However, it simultaneously rejects the suggestion that such contributions be opened up to the free-market, demonstrating an implicit acceptance of capitalism's documented reliance on the unpaid domestic labour of women as a natural and inevitable fact of life (Waring, 1988). Rather than making this reliance explicit, the discourse of the economic new right effectively reconstructs the sacrifices involved in family life as expressions of rational self-interest in disguise, since they too have their rewards in "a richer and more rounded life" (Treasury, 1987, cited in Else, 1992, p. 244). This reconstruction of sacrifice as self-interested behaviour is, however, undermined by an implicit construction of the desire to have children as *irrational*, due to the economic cost and dependence of children on the family:

> The question of equitable access to child-care for working mothers is essentially one of public policy - whether affirmative active is required to assist the life-chances of women. The assumption is not just that the benefits of childrearing do not compensate for the disadvantages from what would be (without the compensation) the result of an irrational desire to have children. Or in the case of unplanned children, that the public should compensate parents for the unexpected net loss. The validity of these assumptions will not be self-evident to all, and depends largely on conclusions reached about the degree of community responsibility for raising children. (Treasury, 1987, cited in Middleton, 1990, p. 86)

As discussed by Middleton (1990), motherhood is thus constituted as something of a contradiction within this discourse. Given that the rational individual competes in the market-place for material rewards, and given also that caring for young children undoubtedly interferes with one's ability to do so very effectively, having children 'clearly' constitutes something rather less than a fully rational decision (Middleton, 1990).

Within the workplace, measures such as affirmative action and initiatives such as subsidised child care are deemed to be an unnecessary intervention in the labour market. The former is regarded as antithetical to the concept of free and open competition between job seekers, and is also seen to undermine the ability of employers to exercise full and autonomous control over their own businesses. Regarding the second matter, child care is reconstructed within this discourse as the private concern and responsibility of individual parents, and hence it is argued that such care should be provided on a 'user-pays' basis (Middleton, 1990; Easting, 1992). This new understanding provides the discursive rationale for a marked decline in State funding of early child care services. It is also evident in Treasury's *Brief To The Incoming Government* (1987), which distinguishes between early childhood services providing care and those providing education in order to then "define care as a custodial arrangement which should be the private responsibility of parents" (Easting, 1992, p. 131). On these grounds, child care subsidies for under two year olds were subsequently reduced in the 1991 Budget, and additional cuts were made to child care subsidies for beneficiaries in 1993 (Hubbard, 1994). At the same time, an early childhood initiative called 'Parents as First Teachers' was introduced which aimed to highlight *parental* responsibility in the area of early childhood education (Kedgley, 1996). Such (home-based) education was in turn constructed as crucial to children's ability to develop the basic skills to equip them for a lifetime of learning in today's global economy (Birch, 1995). Clearly, policy developments such as these indicate the National Government's desire to *privatise* the child care bill and transfer the full responsibility for biological and social reproduction to individuals, their families and the marketplace.

While the economic new right affirms 'equality' for women in the market place, it is generally unsupportive of the need for women to be given 'special privileges' such as time off for bearing and rearing children (Else, 1992). Nor does it conceive the State as having any obligation to provide good and affordable child care facilities. This position is evident in comments made by Ann Knowles, President of the New Zealand Employers' Federation, in an appearance on *Parent Time*. In response to the question "What do employers think when an employee is pregnant?", Knowles cites a number

of negative aspects of this issue from an employer's perspective, including the potential for increased absenteeism, the loss of flexibility in work hours, the potential for disruption if the parent-employee cannot work overtime due to child care responsibilities, and the risk that other employees may feel that a parent-employee is getting special treatment. Later, Knowles offered the following advice to new mothers returning to work early: "be organised, *take responsibility for making sure those negative things don't happen*" (*Parent Time* TV3 6.6.95; emphasis added). This casual comment very effectively reiterates the economic new right's implicit construction of the ideal worker as an unencumbered and career-oriented individual - a construction which is virtually irreconcilable with the everyday demands of involved parenthood.

Regarding single parenthood, while the economic new right appears to have nothing against single women keeping their children, it views it as uneconomical and indeed inappropriate for the State to provide financial support for that decision. In line with its desire to divulge some of the State's responsibilities for the provision of care and financial support for those in need (Boston, 1992), the economic new right has overseen various changes to the DPB designed to privatise the cost of childrearing. Increasingly, choices for young single mothers are being constricted to returning to the traditional family unit in some form or other, or offering their child up for adoption. As a key exponent of this discourse once stated:

> If the 16 year old engages in sexual adventure and there's an unintended pregnancy, she has to make choices.... If her family doesn't want her and if she is not able to get her partner...to support her economically, she must look at other choices, which is adoption. That is not a forced choice, it's the choice young women made before the domestic purposes benefit was available as of right. (Richardson, 1988, cited in Kelsey & O'Brien, 1995, p. 21)

As discussed above, this discourse has had an intimate association with the process of social and economic policy-making in New Zealand, and provided the discursive rationalisation for sweeping economic and social reforms during the mid to late 1980s and early 1990s. It is indelibly linked in the minds of the New Zealand public with the policies of the fourth Labour Government and the National caucus of 1990-1993, and with key figures involved in both regimes - most notably Roger Douglas, Ruth Richardson, Jenny Shipley, and Simon Upton. Treasury, the Business Roundtable, the Employers Federation, and the political party ACT New Zealand are also associated with the discourse of the economic new right (Price, 1994), as is the weekly publication *National Business Review.*

The Discourse of Liberal-Humanism

Since the historical origins, underlying assumptions and key propositions of this discourse have already been discussed in relation to its expression in contemporary America, I do not intend to reiterate this material here. Suffice to say, liberal-humanism in New Zealand is historical grounded in the classical liberal tradition, but has obviously not been influenced by the American Declaration of Independence and thus does not place quite the same overriding emphasis on the inalienable right of free speech and action. Typically emphasised instead is "the essential worth and dignity of each and every person" (Facer, 1992, p. 18). The New Zealand liberal-humanist tradition is also marked by a distinct spirit of *meritocracy*, or the belief that regardless of their gender, race or class, each individual should have access to the same opportunities in life and be encouraged to reach their full potential, and that material rewards should be allocated according to ability or merit (Middleton, 1990).

While the discourse of the economic new right clearly highjacked New Zealand's political sphere during the late 1980s and early 1990s, liberal-humanism remains dominant within the social and cultural realms. As in America, liberal-humanism in New Zealand espouses a pluralistic conception of family organisation, a notion which was clearly circulating within the public realm during the period of this investigation. For example Jacky Maher, presenter of an *Assignment* documentary on the New Zealand family, extended the concept of 'family' to include reconstituted, gay, lesbian and single-parent families, in addition to the traditionally nuclear form:

> The family is a place of love and commitment between parents and their children. But Peter is not Samuel's real father. He's his step-father. Brett is gay. He's also a step-father to Sasha, his partner's son. Joyce has two children and she's never been married. She's part of an extended family where two of her brothers are also unmarried with children. (Maher, *Assignment* TVOne 8.6.95)

New Zealand liberal-humanism has also assimilated liberal-feminist themes, concepts and statements around motherhood. The notion that 'mothers have needs too', for example, is a key premise of liberal-feminist discourse; one publicly expressed in 1968 by a Kingseat Psychiatrist, Dr Fraser McDonald. McDonald coined the term "suburban neurosis" to describe what Betty Friedan had early termed 'the problem with no name'. Both sought to recognise the deep depression and feelings of anxiety and hopelessness expressed by young mothers and housewives isolated in their suburban homes (Friedan, 1971; Kedgley, 1996). In a move which was to generate considerable controversy in this country, McDonald claimed that women needed more than 24-hour-a-day motherhood, and suggested that much of the despondency he had witnessed in

his professional capacity was a result of "the grossly unsatisfying roles women were expected to play" (Kedgley, 1996, p. 221). This sentiment was later taken up during the second wave of the women's movement via initiatives such as the Working Women's Charter of 1976, which called for widely available childcare on the grounds that both mothers and children would benefit from the wider range of social connections that childcare services could provide (Ibid.).

Another liberal-feminist theme that has been more recently assimilated within liberal-humanist discourse is the notion that decisions concerning motherhood should properly remain in the hands of the individual woman concerned. This concept was most emphatically expressed during 1995 on the locally-produced prime-time soap opera, *Shortland Street* (TV2 7pm weeknights). In a storyline developed over several nights (in particular, the 3rd and 5th of April), one of the staff nurses, Carmen, considers having a tubal ligation, and faces mixed reactions from her colleagues at the clinic. Waverly, the clinic's young receptionist, is particularly critical, and makes statements such as "but no *normal* woman would do that!", "I just think its a crime against nature, that's all", and "she is denying herself the chance to be part of a miracle". In keeping with the widely-acknowledged liberal orientation of this serial, however, Waverly is shouted down by other characters, most significantly her boyfriend Nick, who accuses her of being a "closet fascist" and "President of the Moral Majority", thus clearly identifying her discursive position as that of the moral right, and simultaneously correcting this erroneous viewpoint with the liberal truism "if she doesn't want to be a battery hen then it's *her* business". The underlying liberal orientation of this series is also articulated by Carmen's doctor, Grace Kwan. Faced with Carmen's admonishment "If you don't respect *my right to choose*, then I'll just find a doctor who does", Grace replies "No, *it's your choice*, but it's my responsibility to make sure that you don't make an uninformed decision" (emphasis added). Finally, the Clinic Director's personal assistant, Jenny Harrison, counsels Carmen that if her mind is made up, then its better to have the ligation than an unintended pregnancy. Recounting her own recent termination, she informs Carmen that "*it was the right decision*, but also the hardest I've ever made; I'd hate to see you go through the same thing" (emphasis added).

The view that mothers have the right to pursue a career was also in circulation in New Zealand during this period, and was affirmed in women's magazines such as the *New Zealand Women's Weekly,* which featured stories about Jude Dobson, Rachel Hunter and Hilary Timmins, all well-known New Zealand television personalities who are, or were then about to become, new mothers.[13] It is clearly evident, for example, in the reported response of supermodel Rachel Hunter to criticisms that she wants 'the best of

both worlds': "I guess people think I'm pretty selfish having my own life but that's tough, I have to have my own life, my kids are going to have theirs. I make sure they don't suffer in any way" (Hunter, cited in Fleming, 1995, p. 10). Single motherhood was also discursively normalised on the small screen, most notably via the character of George Samuels, solo mother and Detective Sergeant in the New Zealand production *Plaincothes.*

Undeniably, this discourse has come to be an important voice within social policy during the last 25 years, informing the implementation of legislation such as the Equal Pay Act (1972) and the Human Rights Commission Act (1977), both of which aimed to prevent discrimination against women in the public sphere. The liberal-feminist principle of affirmative action was materially manifested in the establishment of Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) programmes within the public sector in 1988, and the Employment Equity Act (1990) later sought to legislate equal pay for work of equal value, although this Act was quickly repealed by the incoming National Government (Macdonald, 1993). Within the education sector, liberal feminists have fought to remove sex-stereotyping from school text books and to eradicate sexist teaching practices, and have actively encouraged young women to take up non-traditional subjects such as physics (Middleton, 1990). Finally, the New Zealand campaign for reproductive freedom and better access to abortion services has reflected liberal assumptions concerning individual sovereignty and the right of women to exercise the ultimate authority and control over their own bodies (May, 1992).

The Discourse of the Moral Right

Since the underlying assumptions and key propositions of moral right discourse have similarly been discussed in relation to the United States, I will limit my task here to that of demonstrating the specificity of its articulation within New Zealand's public sphere during the mid 1990s. As discussed by Ryan (1988), Spoonley et al. (1988), Else (1992), Easting (1992) and others, the growth of the moral right in New Zealand has crystallised around a small number of contentious issues. These include the liberalisation of contraception and abortion legislation in 1977, the Homosexual Law Reform Bill of 1986, sex education in schools, and a more recent 'anti-smacking' campaign spearheaded by the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Service (CYPFS) during 1995. These and other issues have fuelled fears that traditional values are being 'squeezed out' of the political, social and cultural realms in this country, and have sparked something of a conservative counteraction. Of particular note, locally-based conservative women recently rallied in opposition to the CYPFS campaign (along with a related attempt by Hamilton East M.P. Diane Yates to repeal Clause 59 of

the Crimes Act) by organising a petition calling for Parliament to "retain the rights of parents to discipline their children [and to] use a smack as a form of simple discipline". Sex education in New Zealand schools has also been contested, most notably by *Women For Life*, which runs a programme in a number of schools encouraging teenagers to 'just say no' to pre-marital sex (Rorani, 1994).

Counter-initiatives such as these reflect a growing perception in the eyes of conservative New Zealanders that the traditional family unit is "under siege" from "pop culture, easy divorce and the loss of old-fashioned values".[14] As in the United States, liberal-humanism is seen to underpin these "enemies of the family". In particular, the overriding emphasis on the rights and freedoms of individual citizens is held by the moral right to undermine proper recognition of an individual's responsibilities to their family and society as a whole. As Annetta Moran (spokeswoman on family and social issues for the Christian Democrats) argues,

> We hear a lot today in society about rights, you know, my right to a benefit, my right to sex, my right to condoms, my right to have a child if I want to. But we don't hear very much about the corresponding responsibilities that go with rights. (Moran, cited in *Assignment* 8.6.95)

In order to reverse the current slide toward social degeneration, the moral right in this country similarly calls for a return to what they believe were the 'good old days' when there were immutable standards of right and wrong, clear-cut and conventional gender roles and a widespread affirmation of the 'traditional' family unit, along with conservative social and moral values (Ryan, 1988). Legal heterosexual marriage is thus reaffirmed by moral right activists such as Moran as the only proper site for the expression of human sexuality and biological reproduction:

> The best definition of family has been and still should be, a mother and a father who are legally married, who actually stand up publicly and make a commitment to each other and their children. (Moran, cited in *Assignment* 8.6.95)

Like the family, conventional motherhood is allegedly under threat from 'free love', excessive individualism, and most of all, feminism. At the 1979 United Women's Convention, for example, conservative women formed a protest group called 'Save Our Homes' and claimed that the women's movement was "downgrading motherhood and making women reject the full-time role of mother, or feel less happy with it" (Kedgley, 1996, p. 265). A year later, 14,000 women signed a 'mother's petition' repudiating "those parts of the Working Women's Charter which denigrated

motherhood or threatened the stability of family life" (Ibid.). Such activism is discursively grounded in a construction of motherhood and domesticity as women's primary role and the source of their identity and fulfilment in life (Tutua-Nathan, 1994). Women's irrefutable, God-ordained biological 'nature' is central to moral right discourse, as is the notion of maternal sacrifice. For example, former *New Zealand Herald* columnist Frank Haden affirms women's 'natural' propensity for childrearing while simultaneously reifying sacrifice as a key signifier for 'good' motherhood:

> There are several things women do better than men. Looking after kids is the main one. Mothers acquire a complete set of new senses when their children are born.... Men don't attain these senses and can't pretend they do.... Women have always been prepared to make enormous personal sacrifices for their children, even if it meant impoverishing themselves, subordinating their private ambitions in the interests of home and children or suffering suburban neurosis. (Haden, 1994, p. C9)

As in the United States, single motherhood is at times associated here in New Zealand with a lack of respect for authority, criminality, generalised social disorder, and impending chaos. This rather gloomy vision of contemporary society, along with its discursive underpinnings, are clearly expressed by Tauranga district court Judge Kearney in a speech to the annual Rotary district conference, which linked the rising crime rate to:

> [T]he breakdown in the family unit, increasing numbers joining the ranks of the amoral.... [T]he growth of the materialistic and permissive society.... The promotion of promiscuity and anti-authority behaviour, the acceptance of violent behaviour, increased use of alcohol and drugs *and the dramatic growth of one-parent families*. (*WT* 22.3.95, p. 10; emphasis added)

While it does not dispute that women have rights and should be able to engage in paid employment (Pullella, 1995), the moral right in this country typically constructs women's participation in full-time work as detrimental to the family unit and especially children, who have a competing right to the full time care and attention of their natural mother (MacKinlay, 1983; Wearing, 1984). Social science research is frequently cited to highlight the negative effects of child care on the emotional development of small children, particularly as a consequence of maternal separation anxiety (see, for example, Rorani, 1993). In these terms, it is argued that women must choose *between* a career and their family since unlike men, women cannot have both (Cheary, 1995).

Those who attempt to 'have it all' are seen to be selfishly depriving their children and undermining the cohesion of the family unit and ultimately, society as we know it:

> Women now want to have their cake and eat it. Women want to climb into the seats of power...but at the same time come home in the evening to happy, contented families where there are miraculously no teenage abortions, no rapes, no army of disoriented teenagers roaming the streets or committing suicide. It can't be done. Something has to give. (Haden, 1994, p. C9)

While proponents of this discourse are drawn from various mainstream religions, their numbers have been boosted in recent years by the emergence of fundamentalist Pentecostal and evangelical ministries in this country, many of which are modelled on their American counterparts (Ryan, 1988). Outside the churches, moral right activists are clustered around numerous single-issue organisations which assert pro-life and pro-family values, including the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child (SPUC), the Society for the Promotion of Community Standards (SPCS), Women For Life (WFL) and the Coalition of Concerned Citizens (CCC).[15] Moral right discourse also underpins the social and economic policies proposed by both the Christian Heritage Party[16] and the newly formed Christian Democrats Party. The later, the brainchild of conservative M.P. Graham Lee, espouses a "pro-life" ethos and seeks to tackle those "enemies of the family" - drug and alcohol abuse, gambling, pornography and sexual permissiveness - in a bid to restore traditional social and moral values to New Zealand society (*NZH* 10.5.95, p.5; Orsman, 1995). Publications such as *Humanity, Challenge Weekly*, *Coalition Courier*, and *Women For Life Magazine* similarly present the moral right perspective on a range of social issues.

Child-Centred Discourse

As discussed by May (1992), the renewed consciousness of women's political and economic rights during the 1970s and 1980s was accompanied by an emerging recognition of the rights of children in New Zealand and around the world. During this period, the silence which had previously surrounded the physical, sexual and psychological abuse and neglect of women and children was lifted, and reported cases subsequently skyrocketed. Troubling research findings and public discussion of the problem effectively redefined the New Zealand family as a potentially dangerous place for children, many of whom were evidently the victims of violent and sexual assault. The view also emerged at this time that the interests of children were "not necessarily synonymous with those of their parents" (May, 1992, p. 311). Acknowledging this disjunction, many called for the rights of children to be reviewed.

Internationally, this call has been materially realised in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990), Article 14 of which recognises children not as family chattels, but as young individuals with evolving minds who have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Clearly then, the liberal-humanist concept of individual sovereignty is extended (at least in part) to legal minors within this discourse. While the main body of the Convention is primarily concerned to protect the basic right of all children to an adequate standard of living, education, health care, and social security, its child-centred perspective is reflected in the assertion that the best interests of the child should be the guiding principle in any decision-making which effects the child (Julian, 1992). The rights of children are, for example, affirmed in the National Government's new immunisation strategy, announced in March 1995, which effectively forces parents to decide whether or not to immunise their children. As former Health Minister Jenny Shipley put it, "Parents would retain the right to choose, but they would no longer have the option of not making a choice", because "*the right of children to remain free of preventable diseases comes first*" (*WT* 30.3.95, p. 7; emphasis added).

Over the last 30 years, the priority given to the needs and rights of children over those of their mothers or primary caregivers has been evident in the promotion of stay-at-home motherhood and child care practices such as demand and breast-feeding. Organisations such as Plunket, Playcentre and Parents Centre have often advocated practices informed by Bowlby's theory of maternal deprivation discussed above, and have thereby perpetuated the notion that children suffer if deprived of a full time, one-on-one relationship with mother until the age of four or five (Kedgley, 1996). Maternal deprivation theory also partially underpinned policy initiatives designed to stabilise the relationship between children and their mothers. The introduction of the DPB, for example, was supported by the 1972 Royal Commission on Social Security on the grounds that the State should actively encourage women to be full-time mothers, regardless of their marital status (Ibid.). In echoes of Bowlby, the importance of close mother-child bonding during the first year of life was re-emphasised during the 1980s as international and local experts again claimed that the child's emotional and psychological development would be endangered if mothers worked outside the home during this crucial period (Ibid.).

With support from the women's movement, child-rearing 'experts' and health institutions, along with organisations such as Plunket and the La Leche League, began during the 1970s to actively promote breastfeeding as the most natural and preferable method, apparently to such an extent that many women who could not physically do so experienced feelings of guilt and inadequacy (May, 1992). After a period of decline,

breastfeeding is back in vogue in the mid-1990s. Backed up by the weight of medical and scientific evidence of its many positive health and physiological benefits, breastfeeding is presently being reconstructed by childcare experts as necessary in order to give young children the 'best possible start' in life. The Waikato Plunket Society, for example, recently released an educational video entitled *Best Possible Start* which encouraged breastfeeding up to and beyond three months. Practical guidance was also offered to mothers planning to return to work soon after giving birth on how to juggle this time-consuming and sometimes painful practice with paid employment (*WT* 2.3.95, p. 2).

As this suggests, unlike the discourse of the moral right, child-centred discourse does not generally villainise working mothers, providing they have made adequate arrangements for the care and protection of their children. Increasingly, however, public condemnation has become directed toward those mothers who fail in their duties to arrange adequate supervision for their children in their absence. Much of the media coverage and public discussion of the spate of 'home alone' cases in 1995 was notable for its barely-concealed moral outrage. In the wake of the Hoeta family's tragedy (discussed above), the Summary Offences Act was invoked to charge numerous negligent mothers (but not *fathers*), whom the Commissioner for Children, Mr Laurie O'Reilly, described as "dicing with their children's lives" (*NZH* 11.3.95, p.1; *WT* 11.3.95, p.2). And while some commentators highlighted the fact that many working families faced problems with work change-over periods and stressed the need for practical alternatives such as affordable childcare rather than condemnation (see, for example, Hubbard, 1994), the overriding theme of news coverage of this issue was that of vulnerable children placed at risk through (selfish) maternal neglect.

On a more proactive note, child-centred discourse asserts that babies and young children need lots of quality one-on-one attention, and claims that without it, they may miss out on important learning experiences. Considerable emphasis is placed on facilitating children's intellectual development by way of stimulating their innate capacity for learning. The earlier such stimulation begins, the better. This perspective has become materially embodied in the 'Parents as First Teachers' programme, which apart from increasing parental responsibility for early childcare also aims to give children "the best possible start in life" (*WT* 29.5.95, p. 16). Co-ordinator of the Hamilton group, Val Ford, explains that "quality interaction with parents and play are two of the most effective kinds of learning in these early years, which lay the foundation for future learning" (Ibid.). Among the organisations associated with this discourse are Plunket (which has a long history of advising new mothers on early child care and monitoring the progress of New Zealand's infants), Barnardo's (which

similarly offers support to at-risk infants), the Child Protection Trust, Parentline, CYPFS, and the Office of the Commissioner for Children. Child-centred discourse underpins the widely-adopted 'play-way' method of teaching in primary schools (Offenberger, 1992), and is explicitly expressed in the recent CYPFS anti-smacking campaign, along with M.P. Diane Yates' call to outlaw the use of physical discipline by parents, teachers and care-givers.

Conclusion

From this (admittedly partial) analysis of the wider 'discursive pool' potentially accessible to the participants in this study, a range of competing voices have been identified as 'players' in the on-going struggle to define 'motherhood' and 'the family' in New Zealand today. In terms of the theoretical position asserted here, the introduction of this episode into a different local context creates the potential for New Zealand viewers of *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* to draw on knowledges, experiences and discursive accounts which contradict and destabilise the understanding of 'motherhood' and 'the family' upheld and affirmed in this episode, and to thereby shift its signifying potential in ways which alter its meaning in subtle and often unpredictable ways. Just as it is impossible to predict which of a vast array of historical, cultural, political and social knowledges and experiences will be drawn on by any particular viewer or group of viewers in their encounter with this foreign cultural production, it is equally impossible to predict how individuals or groups will utilise the various discourses accessible to them in making sense of the issues and debates it grapples with. Such insight can only be attained through an empirical investigation into audience receptions of the content and agenda of this American sitcom episode, to which our attention now turns. Before presenting the findings of this qualitative analysis of participants' receptions however, it is necessary to firstly review the existing body of research pertaining to the various issues it seeks to address.

V

Studies of Audience Reception

Introduction

Having examined the contexts of production and reception, along with the narrative structure and discursive content of *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato*, this chapter presents a critical overview of reception research pertaining to the various issues addressed in the third prong of this tri-partite investigation - a qualitative analysis of New Zealanders' receptions of this controversial American sitcom episode. These issues include the power of media to 'set the agenda' for viewer interpretation and response, the role of demographic and social group memberships in differentiating audience receptions, the significance of cultural location in shaping the encounter between 'foreign' texts and local viewers, and the various modes of reception that can be adopted by viewers in the process of sense construction. Each of these issues, it is argued, impinges upon the actual and potential role of American entertainment television in discursive struggles around 'motherhood' and 'the family' in New Zealand today, as explored in chapters VI and VII.

'Setting the Agenda'

The first body of research that warrants some discussion here addresses the social (and perhaps more specifically, *political*) significance of media productions. Studies conducted by Corner et al. (1990a and 1990b), Philo (1990, 1993 and 1995), Kitzinger (1993), Miller (1994) and Roscoe et al. (1995) reflect a pronounced concern with the power of media texts to 'set the agenda' for public discussions of controversial issues such as nuclear energy, IRA 'terrorism' and HIV/AIDS. They also seek to identify the extent to which groups with varying degrees of 'interest' in these issues are able to negotiate and even resist those textual agendas in order to construct alternative accounts of these issues.

Corner et al. (1990a and 1990b), for example, examined responses to four audio-visual texts produced during the two years following the Chernobyl nuclear reactor disaster of 1986. The authors suggest that the different approaches taken by each text reflects a much wider conflict in Britain at that time over the status of the often specialised 'knowledge' grounding the nuclear energy debate. The BBC2 documentary

The Uncertain Legacy, for example, worked to "give coherence, credibility and resonance to fears that arise in contemplating the health risks of nuclear power technologies" (Corner et al., 1990a, p. 110). The Central Electricity Generating Board's promotional video *Energy: The Nuclear Option*, on the other hand, attempted to normalise nuclear power and to counter such fears with reasoned argument. This conflict between different viewpoints was also evident in the responses of fourteen 'interest groups' who viewed and discussed these texts. Participants in the Rotary group, for example, often drew on knowledge they possessed as professionals in relevant areas such as medicine, and did so in a way which reflected their belief that these texts lacked some of the information necessary for them to make an informed judgement (Corner et al., 1990b). Participants in the group of unemployed persons, on the other hand, were generally suspicious of government-related institutions and spokespersons, and were highly sceptical of the accounts offered by the industry itself (Ibid.). Meanwhile, the Heysham Nuclear Power Station group perceived themselves as having 'inside knowledge' of the industry that journalists and the general public lacked, and consequently expressed concern about the accuracy of the facts and arguments presented by each programme (Ibid.).

While identifying the ways in which members of these groups actively negotiated their readings of the texts, the authors also demonstrate the power of these texts to set the agenda for that process of sense production. A subtext of threat in *The Uncertain Legacy*, for example, clearly encouraged viewers to infer that nuclear power was dangerous, particularly through its use of visual images. While rejecting this inference, the Heysham group perceived the danger or threat presented by nuclear energy to be the primary meaning of this text, and read it as offering a decisive anti-nuclear message by way of exaggerating, manipulating and excluding certain evidence. The (pro-nuclear) Conservatives expressed some difficulty resisting making the inferences suggested by this programme, while the Labour group actively extended the logic of its argument one step further to suggest that the increased incidence of phenomena such as cancer around nuclear energy plants was hardly coincidental (Ibid.). While a different point-of-view was clearly adopted by each group of viewers in relation to this issue, the authors stress that the power of *The Uncertain Legacy* to set the agenda for public debate is clearly demonstrated by the fact that each group focused on the threat or danger presented by nuclear energy.

Similar insights have emerged from various studies conducted by the Glasgow University Media Group (GUMG). These studies have commonly investigated the way in which news media messages are received and interpreted by different sections of their audience, with a view to assessing their effectiveness and the conditions under

which news messages may be decoded in different or aberrant ways. Using a methodology known as 'the news game', these researchers have tried to reveal viewers' existing understandings of news content around a particular issue, their own beliefs about it, and whether they accept or reject the dominant media account of that issue.

Philo (1990, 1993 and 1995), for example, investigated the receptions and interpretations of 'editing groups' to images in the British news media depicting the miners' strike of 1984-5. He found marked similarities between the thematic content and structure of the *fictional* news reports written by the participants in this study, and *actual* news programmes broadcast by the BBC and ITN. Philo also discovered that in order to counter the media's construction of the picketing as mostly violent, viewers had to have access to sources of information and belief other than the media. Groups of miners and police officers, for example, had access to direct and indirect experience of the pickets, enabling these participants to counter the media's distorted representation of them (Philo, 1993). According to this author, "the effect of such experience could traverse class and political culture" (Ibid., p. 265). Among those who lacked experiential insight, however, media representations were found to negatively influence viewers' perceptions of the strikers. For example, while no shotguns were ever reported to have been found on the picket lines, a photograph of a gun which actually belonged to a *non-striking* miner was attributed by over half the participants in the main sample to *striking* miners. Philo argues that this association reflects the fact that violence was overwhelmingly attributed to the picketers in television news coverage. It is also significant that this link was even sometimes made by participants who were *sympathetic* to the miners. The agenda of news reporting had, in other words, influenced their perceptions *despite* their personal beliefs.[1]

A second GUMG study by Miller (1994) explores public perceptions of an incident in which three IRA members were shot dead by British special forces in Gibraltar. Remarkable similarities were again found between the language and tone of news bulletins written by the groups involved in this study, and the language and themes of actual news reports (Miller, 1994). In addition, many participants were found to believe supposedly factual details released by official sources, which later turned out to be *false*. This author concludes that "in groups where people did not have strong political views on Northern Ireland or alternative political identities, official information could structure how people thought about the killings. But alternative information could also make people uneasy in their acceptance of the legitimacy of the actions of the S.A.S." (Ibid., p. 237).

Further insight into the power of textual agendas to define and delimit audience belief is offered by Roscoe et al. (1995) in their study of audience receptions of the British drama-documentary *Who Bombed Birmingham?*, which depicts the campaign to free a group of men wrongfully convicted of an IRA bombing. These scholars found that while viewers' negotiations of this programme were obviously informed by a wealth of prior knowledge and experience bought with them to their textual encounter, very few moved beyond the parameters set down by the text and its definition of what was important to talk about in relation to the bombing: namely, the Birmingham Six's innocence and the miscarriage of justice that had evidently occurred. One exception to this was the group of Further Education teachers, whose political beliefs and activism provided access to an oppositional discourse that was *not* presented within the programme, enabling them to challenge the legitimacy of the British presence and role in Northern Ireland and to criticise the text for failing to question this (Roscoe et al., 1995). In this case, the discursive repertoire available to members of this group enabled them to define the agenda for their discussion of the terrorism issue on their own terms, rather than those laid down by the text itself.

The present investigation draws on a number of these insights in examining how *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* was able to 'set the agenda' for New Zealanders' receptions of it, and in evaluating this text's capacity to define and delimit how 'motherhood' and 'the family'. Chapter VII demonstrates how participants tended to frame their responses in terms consistent with this episode's privileged discursive constructions of 'motherhood' and 'the family'. But while acknowledging this agenda-setting capacity, this study also illustrates the ability of viewers to read 'against the grain' and construct divergent receptions of this television text, by drawing on their various social group memberships and related access to competing discourses of the wider social world. In addition, this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge in this area by demonstrating that viewers' acceptance of, or resistance to, the agendas set by television texts is determined at the moment of sense production via their adoption of particular *modes* of reception. The defining features of each of these different modes is outlined in greater detail below.

Collectively, the studies outlined above lend support to Morley's assertion that textual meaning will be "constructed differently according to the discourses (knowledges, prejudices, resistances) brought to bear on the text by the reader" (Morley, 1980b, p. 50). Similarly, they give credence to his equally important insight that individual differences in interpretation are framed and constrained *but not determined by* socio-cultural factors, and hence that decodings *cannot* be reduced in any simple way to viewers' socioeconomic location (Morley 1980b). In contrast, the work of a somewhat

larger group of researchers has more immediately continued the original mission of Stuart Hall in attempting to identify "how the different subcultural structures and formations within the audience, and the sharing of different cultural codes and competencies amongst different groups and classes, structure the decoding of the message for different sections of the audience" (Morley, 1980b, p. 51). As the following section details, these 'different groups and classes' have frequently been conceived in terms of broad sociological categorisations such as class, gender, ethnicity and age. On the basis of what are now increasingly regarded as gross reductionisms, a substantial number of scholars have investigated the possible link between differences in audience reception and viewers' demographic and/or social group membership(s).

The Role of Demographic and Social Group Membership(s)

A number of these studies have been grounded in Hall's assumption that socioeconomic class is the most significant factor in producing distinct 'clusterings' in audience reception, including Morley's (1980a) influential *Nationwide* research. Press (1989 and 1991a), Seiter et al. (1989) and Jensen (1990b and 1995), for example, categorised their research participants according to their membership of generally either the working or middle class. In some cases, the ensuing focus on the 'variable' of socioeconomic class membership has facilitated the production of significant insight into the relationship between class location and modes of audience reception, an issue which is taken up in greater depth below. For instance, Press (1989) investigated the ways in which working- and middle-class American women made sense of the prime-time American soap opera, *Dynasty*, and found that working-class women tended to read referentially and 'non-critically', making few distinctions between themselves and the female characters depicted on screen. Middle-class women, on the other hand, tended to highlight the differences between themselves and the women of *Dynasty*, and refused to be 'taken in' by the programme's conventions of realism. Very similar patterns of response were discovered in a later study of women's receptions of the American police drama, *Cagney & Lacey* (Press, 1991a). Here, Press found that the middle-class women were consistently more detached and critical in their reception and response than the working-class participants. Middle-class women commonly shifted away from discussing the text's content of abortion, focusing instead on its formal and aesthetic limitations and on technical features such as production imperatives, textual realism, the quality of the acting and whether they felt moved by it (Ibid.). Working-class women, on the other hand, responded more directly to the content of this episode and were much less inclined to criticise it in terms of its formal or generic qualities.

They also resisted the idea that the programme was biased, and highlighted its educational potential. These women clearly enjoyed the programme more than their middle-class counterparts, and responded to it more positively. As Press suggests, the working-class women seemed to have different expectations of television entertainment, or alternatively, felt freer to express their enjoyment of this popular television drama (Ibid.). In terms of the present investigation, these findings offer strong evidence that members of different socioeconomic groups may adopt different modes of audience reception in relation to certain types of television programming, a point that will be elaborated on below.

In other cases, the presumption that socioeconomic class will be the most significant factor in producing clustered readings at the level of reception has proved somewhat misguided. Jensen (1990b and 1995), for example, sought to explore the possible link between socioeconomic class and differences in audience receptions of television news. In order to focus more specifically on the variable of class, Jensen chose to eliminate the potentially 'contaminating' factors of gender and age (Jensen, 1995), a move which effectively reproduces the androcentric bias that has historically plagued social science research (Slocum, 1975; Gilligan, 1982; Harding, 1991). Consistent with this androcentric approach, Jensen then extrapolates from his findings into *men's* reception of news to make the somewhat dubious pronouncement that "with respect to the social uses of news, the differences between various *socioeconomic groups* may be negligible" (Jensen, 1995, p. 89; emphasis added). Problematically, however, having presumed that socioeconomic class will be the most significant factor in shaping the responses of his participants, Jensen fails to consider the possibility that *gender* may be more important in shaping audience receptions of television news programmes.

This possibility is clearly raised by Hobson (1980) (discussed in chapter II) and also by Morley (1986), whose study of family television in Britain examines how household gender relations structure television viewing as a form of cultural behaviour. Morley found that women generally preferred fictional programmes, romances, and local rather than international news, whereas men favoured factual programmes, sport, realistic fiction and BBC productions. These findings are supported by Brown, Childers, Bauman, and Koch (1990), who discovered that female adolescents enjoyed family-oriented drama and comedy while males were heavier viewers of action, adventure and sports shows. Divergent viewing styles between women and men living in industrialised nations have also been identified. Research suggests that whereas men typically adopt a quietly concentrated, fully-engaged mode of viewing, women's viewing is more distracted as they are likely to

simultaneously converse or perform domestic tasks such as ironing, sewing, or knitting (Morley, 1986; Zwaga, 1994).[2]

There are, however, a number of problems with this research charting gender differences in audience reception. One of the key difficulties is that 'evidence' of gender differentiation tends to be based on the accounts and observed activities of women and (not always) men[3] living within traditional western nuclear family situations, in which 'leisure-time' activities are typically structured around the gender division of labour, as noted by Hobson (1980), Brunsdon (1986), and van Zoonen (1994). Studies of women's receptions in particular typically reflect an implicit construction of the 'ordinary' female viewer as working- or middle-class, white, married, and a housewife and mother. Women of colour, single women, working women and lesbians have been generally excluded from this construction of the 'average' woman who watches television, an oversight which compromises the extent to which these findings can be generalised to 'all' women. As Hallam and Marshment (1995) point out, rather than challenging dominant stereotypes about women, these studies effectively *reproduce* very narrow definitions of female viewers, their cultural experiences, and the nature of their encounters with television texts. Given that these findings refer to a fairly specific segment of a wider and more diverse population (women and men living within traditional nuclear family settings), it is obviously not appropriate to suggest that they are representative of the viewing preferences and styles of *all* men and *all* women, since these findings actually exclude those whose domestic arrangements do not conform to this traditional family structure.

Compounding this oversight is a failure to reflect sufficiently on the fact that these findings may chart *social* rather than *natural* distinctions between the sexes. This failure is evident in the more recent work of Livingstone (1994),[4] which examines men's and women's receptions of American and British talk shows. Livingstone found that women commonly engaged with the participatory discussions and debates presented in audience discussion programmes such as *Donahue* and *Oprah Winfrey*, and were especially appreciative of "the opportunity to hear the voices and experiences of ordinary people talking about issues relevant to their everyday lives" (Livingstone, 1994, p. 445). The male participants, on the other hand, were more interested in the views of the 'expert' guest and in how the programme was made, and expressed concern about the motivations and intentions of the host and producers in making it (Ibid.).

Like her predecessors, however, Livingstone proceeds as though the social categories 'men' and 'women' were largely unproblematic and representative of a pre-existing

homogeneity across all men and all women. Similarly, she makes no attempt to critically analyse or *explain* the origin of the gender differences she identifies. By default, gender differences in audience reception are implicitly *naturalised* or essentialised, as if they were the inevitable product of biological sexual difference. Consistent with this essentialisation of gender difference, Livingstone does not attend to variations *within* the broader categories 'male' and 'female', for example between men and women of different socioeconomic class or ethnicity.

The need to acknowledge such variations is clearly demonstrated by two studies linking differences in audience reception and interpretation to differences in ethnicity.[5] Brown and Schulze (1990) investigated the impact of ethnicity on American undergraduates' interpretations of Madonna's music videos. They found that black and white students differed dramatically in their interpretation of the two videos, and did not agree about even the most fundamental story elements. While most white viewers of *Papa Don't Preach* saw the video as being about teenage pregnancy, their black counterparts were twice as likely to see the primary theme as that of the relationship between a young woman and her father. This difference appears to reflect black viewers' interpretation of the 'baby' of which Madonna sings as her *boyfriend,* rather than her *unborn child* (Brown & Schulze, 1990). In attempting to explain this and other variations, these authors insightfully point to the specific cultural experiences of young black Americans, particularly around issues of sexuality and family life:

> Statistics show that early unmarried pregnancy and childbirth is a familiar pattern in black communities.... The black viewers' focus on the boy-girl and father/daughter relationship may reflect the currently more problematic nature of establishing lasting cross-sex relationships in black society. (Ibid., p. 95)

Adding to this, Jhally and Lewis (1992) studied audience receptions of the globally popular American sitcom, *The Cosby Show*, and found distinct differences between black and white North Americans in terms of the significance they placed on the ethnicity of the Huxtables. Many black viewers, for instance, regarded the Huxtables as 'authentically' black in the sense that their language, mannerisms, tones of voice and even household decorations reflected black life. For this ethnic group, *The Cosby Show* created feelings of intimacy and involvement and offered identifications with depictions of African-Americans as strong, intelligent and dignified. White viewers, on the other hand, were found to 'transcend' ethnicity in the sense that they overlooked the fact that the Huxtables are African-Americans and identified with them as a typical American family (Jhally & Lewis, 1992).

If, as the above studies suggest, audience interpretation and response varies according to socioeconomic class, gender, and ethnicity, then it is likely to be similarly differentiated according to age. Studies by Comstock et al. (1978), Barwise and Ehrenberg (1988), Press (1991b), Willis (1995) and Riggs (1996) suggest that this is indeed the case. Among the findings of the British Film Institute's Audience Tracking Study *Television and the Household*, for example, was a distinct tendency among the over-seventies to draw on previous life experiences and relate these to television programmes, in this way using their own past as a guide to interpreting present-day issues and events (Willis, 1995). Reminiscence was thus particularly important for these viewers, many of whom noted the way in which certain television programmes enabled them to recapture lost memories, while other programmes offered insight into aspects of their past life experiences (Ibid.). Within the New Zealand context, older viewers are also considered more likely to mourn the dominance of American television 'trash' within local programming schedules and to favour TVOne's commitment to 'quality' British dramas and "Britcoms" (Lealand, 1994, p. 36). In terms of the present investigation, these tendencies are regarded as characteristic of a referential and mediated mode of reception respectively. Further explication of each of these modes will be provided below.

While the research cited above indicates that receptions are indeed clustered at the level of demographic and social group memberships such as socioeconomic class, gender, ethnicity and age, it is important to emphasise that membership of any particular category does not *determine* the interpretation and response of individual viewers. This is because individuals are always located within several of these categories - they are *multiply* positioned subjects of a particular class, gender, ethnicity and age. The intersection of these multiple subject positions will likely produce differences *within*, as well as between, each of these demographic categories, and may generate readings which undermine the validity of grouping participants according to their class, gender, ethnicity or age alone. In the process, the potential exists for the generation of readings which cannot be fully anticipated, and which may diverge quite dramatically from general trends.

Morley (1986), for example, describes the case of a family in which the woman was a mature student at the local college, and thus possessed access to more cultural capital than her caretaker husband. In this instance, the gendered patterns of taste Morley claimed to be typical of the families in the *Family Viewing* study was reversed, with the woman stating her preference for current affairs programmes and documentaries and expressing her disdain for popular serials such as *Crossroads* and *Dynasty*. Her husband, meanwhile, enjoyed these serials and appeared to have no interest in the

factual programming enjoyed by most other men. Clearly, such a finding reveals that viewing preferences can be constituted in radically different ways to the 'norm' depending, in this case, on the intersection of gender with other factors such as class position and educational achievement. Morley does not, however, acknowledge the implications of such a finding in terms of its problematisation of the very notion of 'gendered viewing' - in fact, his discussion of this example occurs *outside* the main body of this text.

Alongside this substantial body of research addressing the link between television reception and socioeconomic class or demographic group membership(s), there has emerged a growing interest in the role of various social and interest group memberships in shaping viewer interpretation and response. Various factors have been found to divide and disrupt the traditional sociological categories of socioeconomic class, gender, ethnicity and age, including moral and political belief (Condit, 1989; Press, 1991a), personal experience of male violence (Schlesinger et al., 1992), degree of feminist consciousness (Ford & Latour, 1993), sexual identity (Cohen, 1991; Feuer, 1995), political orientation (Liebes & Ribak, 1994), genre fanship (Tulloch & Jenkins, 1995) and religious culture (Hamilton & Rubin, 1992; Stout, 1994; Valenti & Stout, 1996). Much of this research implicitly reveals precisely *why* the common methodological practice of categorising research participants according to their membership of particular demographic and social groups is so problematic, by effectively exposing the multiplicity that exists *within*, as well as *between*, each of these sites of difference.[6]

In the wake of a growing realisation that audience receptions are shaped by a matrix of demographic and social group memberships, audience researchers have adopted various methodological strategies aimed at acknowledging and more effectively charting the complexity of this terrain. Some, such as Schlesinger et al. (1992) have chosen to incorporate a range of demographic categories in combination with social group memberships presumed to be (more) relevant given the nature of the research. Since their study was intended to investigate women's reactions to, and interpretations of, media portrayals of violence against women, these researchers tested the possible influence of socioeconomic class, ethnicity, nationality *and also* the more salient factor of women's experience of male violence. The combination of demographic and non-demographic variables makes this research better equipped to recognise the multiple divisions that exist within, as well as between, different groups of women.

Other researchers have attempted to bypass the pitfalls of prescriptive prior categorisation and group power relations altogether by investigating the receptions of

their participants on an individual basis. Hallam and Marshment, for example, investigated women's receptions of the BBC production *Oranges are not the Only Fruit*, and note that

> This small group included a range of positions across, for example, age, occupation, ethnicity, religion, marital status and sexual preference that was...surprisingly broad. This in itself reveals...that people's different positionings cannot be neatly compartmentalised, but are composed of a complex of overlapping categorisations which can also change over time. (Hallam & Marshment, 1995, p. 4)

In recognition of the way in which their participants were multiply positioned, these researchers conducted individual viewing sessions and interviews which in turn allowed them to identify the specific variables most significant in framing both individual accounts and those offered by different groups of participants.[7]

In terms of the present research, the significance of the studies outlined above lies firstly in their identification of a relationship between differences in audience reception and demographic and social group membership(s), and secondly in their collective *complication* of the nature of that link. Taken together, these studies suggest that while audience reception is clearly patterned at the level of such group membership(s), these groups are not themselves homogeneous but rather, consist of "a complicated pattern of overlapping sub-groups, and sub-cultures, within which individuals are situated" (Morley, 1980b, p. 50-51). Furthermore, individuals are always located within *several* such groups and sub-cultures at any one time (Fiske, 1989b; Schrøder, 1994), and do not adopt stable or fixed positions within them. Social subjects are in this way "the product of multiple social determinations" (Jordin & Brunt, 1986, p. 236) and are able to draw from their different 'social alliances' in making sense of television texts (Dahlgren, 1988). This theoretical understanding implies that the content and form of individual receptions is not *determined* by social group membership in any immediate or unproblematic way (Philo, 1990), and hence cannot be predicted in advance on the basis of an individual's membership of any particular group or subculture.

The present investigation seeks to more fully recognise these important insights by exploring the link between demographic and social group memberships and audience reception in a way which avoids prescribing in advance which aspect(s) of any individual's multi-faceted identity will be most relevant in any particular instance. While the initial selection process used in this study was necessarily guided by information regarding the demographic and social group memberships of each

participant, the use of *individual* rather than group interviews combined with an open-ended questioning style offered respondents the relative freedom to draw on any combination of their multiple group memberships in formulating a response to this American sitcom episode. This represents a significant departure from the dominant methodological framework which underpins much of the qualitative audience research discussed above - that of focus group research. While not wishing to discount the very real insight generated by these studies, focus group research inevitably categorises participants according to one or more aspects of their multi-faceted identity. Proceeding as it does on the basis of this artificially-constructed and prescriptive homogeneity, the focus group method then relies on the initiative of individual participants to interrupt this illusion of a shared identity by drawing attention to those allegiances which may be more immediately salient to their own reception. The intended contribution of this study, conversely, is to demonstrate the value of enabling participants' *actual* responses to guide the formulation of theory regarding the link between audience reception and social group memberships.

Cross-Cultural Audience Studies

Complementing this large body of research highlighting divergent receptions *within* national populations is another collection of studies which have been more specifically concerned with understanding the role of cultural differences in structuring viewers' receptions of television. In many respects, this interest in the nature and process of cross-cultural audience reception comprises a response to concerns regarding the way in which *American* television productions are received by non-American audiences. Such anxiety is articulated in the work of media theorists such as Dorfman and Mattelart (1975), Tunstall (1977), and Schiller (1979), who have theorised the global implications of American 'cultural imperialism' - defined as the increasingly universal influence of American commercial and media products. For these theorists, the commercial role of the American media in developing societies simultaneously fulfils a particular *ideological* function. Schiller (1979), for example, suggests that, as a vehicle for corporate marketing, the media is surreptitiously engaged in a process of manipulating third world audience nations into becoming ready and willing consumer markets for the ever-expanding stream of material goods being manufactured within Western capitalist nations. An additional manipulative effect is achieved through the media's depiction of capitalism as a desirable way of life and developmental path which developing nations should emulate, a depiction which conceals the deeper realities of alienation, exploitation and inequality. Moreover, one of the key by-products of media imperialism is held to be that of cultural domination, as Tunstall explains:

> *The cultural imperialism thesis* claims that authentic, traditional and local culture in many parts of the world is being battered out of existence by the indiscriminate dumping of large quantities of slick commercial and media products, mainly from the United States. (Tunstall, 1977, p. 57; original emphasis.)

Thus, for proponents of this thesis, the pervasive infiltration of 'Americana' - whether in the form of Levi's, MacDonalds, Coca Cola, Hollywood movies or entertainment television - brings with it American values and lifestyles, and thereby poses a threat to "authentic national cultures and identities" (Ang, 1985, p. 2). Problematically however, these scholars provide no empirical evidence that such ideological and dominating effects are indeed exerted upon audiences in developing nations. On the contrary, the 'cultural imperialism' theorists simply assume that the all-pervasive media exerts a powerful, cumulative and unmediated ideological effect on these vulnerable and somewhat naive receivers (Lealand, 1988 and 1994; Morley & Robins, 1995).

More recently, these allegations have been refuted by reception theorists and researchers, on the grounds that this scenario relies on the unsubstantiated and simplistic 'hypodermic needle' theory of audience effects, thus over-estimating the ease with which American television programmes are able to cross national and linguistic borders and 'infiltrate' other cultures. As Katz and Liebes (1985) suggest, this thesis also presumes that there is a peculiarly American message 'concealed' within American television texts, which is homogeneously absorbed by non-American viewers regardless of their national or cultural location. As part of a wider attempt to challenge the American cultural imperialism thesis, a number of researchers have examined the way in which non-American audiences actually understand and interact with American cultural products, including films, television programmes, music and consumer goods (Hebdige, 1982; Ang, 1985; Liebes, 1984; Katz & Liebes, 1985; Michaels, 1986; Liebes & Katz, 1990; Wilson, 1996).

Ang's (1985) study of receptions of the American prime-time soap opera *Dallas* among Dutch viewers is highly significant in this respect. Ang found that Dutch fans regarded the excessive wealth and complex family relations of the characters in this serial as unrealistic, yet were able to recognise and relate to their emotional and relationship problems, or what Ang (1985, p. 45) describes as the "tragic structure of feeling" so central to this genre. She consequently argues that *Dallas* was popular in the Netherlands because of its ability to pleasurably connect with the 'melodramatic imagination' of viewers, a process which Ang maintains has no natural association

with the imposition of consumerist values as suggested by the American cultural imperialism theorists.

The findings of this and other studies of cross-cultural audience reception demonstrate that American 'penetration' is not a straightforward act of cultural colonisation, but rather, that cross-cultural reception can be more appropriately thought of as an "interdiscursive encounter" (Moores, 1993, p. 46). The outcome of this encounter is held to be relatively idiosyncratic, since it is determined at the micro level of interpretation and response, as opposed to the macro level of a text's (American) production, as proponents of the cultural imperialism thesis implicitly assert. Studies have found that cross-cultural sense-making involves a constant and *active* process of mediation, selection and transformation by (differently) culturally-located subjects. Often, mainstream American television programmes have been found to serve as forums for foreign viewer's conversations, reflection and thought about their own lives and cultural experiences (Liebes, 1984; Ang, 1985; Liebes & Katz, 1989 and 1990; Biltereyst, 1995). Rather than textual meanings being simply diffused among unsuspecting foreign audiences, then, non-American viewers have been found to make sense of American television programmes and other cultural texts in relation to their *own* cultural location, and to appropriate these texts in ways which alter their meaning in subtle and at times fundamental ways (Ang, 1985; Liebes & Katz, 1990; Biltereyst, 1995).

Of particular relevance is the work of Katz and Liebes on Israeli, Japanese and American receptions of the internationally successful American soap opera, *Dallas* (Liebes, 1984; Katz & Liebes, 1985; Liebes & Katz, 1989 and 1990). Their early findings reveal that many Israelis made sense of this American soap by relating it to their own cultural experiences and traditions, often reflecting on their own circumstances in the process (Liebes, 1984; Liebes & Katz, 1989). Moroccan Israelis, for example, used this text to escape from problems experienced in their immediate cultural context, such as cramped living quarters and the prolonged Lebanese campaign (Liebes, 1984). Cross-cultural differences were also registered at the level of textual meaning or *ideology*. While the American viewers denied the possibility that *Dallas* could have a serious message on the grounds that it was purely entertainment, the Arab and Russian Israelis perceived it as representing "moral degeneracy" or "rotten capitalism" (Liebes & Katz, 1989, p. 209).

Overturning the traditional focus on non-American receptions of American television, Philo (1990) and Miller (1994) offer insight into the way in which *Americans* make sense of political events in Britain and Ireland. A group of American students involved

in Philo's (1990) study were shown photographic stills from television news reports of the miner's conflict. Not surprisingly, given that they had not been in Britain at the time of the miner's strike and were thus not exposed to the extensive British media coverage of the strike action, "only one of twenty-eight people could identify a picture of Arthur Scargill and in general they had very little prior knowledge of the issues involved" (Philo, 1990, p. 134). What is interesting, however, is that in the absence of this 'insider knowledge' of British labour relations, the American students effectively made sense of these images by reading then in terms of their own accumulated stock of (different) cultural experiences. Thus, they effectively reconstituted the strike as an *American* labour dispute, substituting the National Coal Board with private "mining companies" and pick-line violence with "riots" and "looting" (Ibid., p. 135). The American students also associated a picture of a *shot*-gun with the strikers rather than police, since in their country, law enforcement agents use *hand*-guns. A journalist from the Soviet Union, on the other hand, was convinced that the gun was planted by a government agent or "provocateur" with the aim of blackening the miner's cause (Ibid., p. 146).

Similarly, Miller (1994) found that four of the twenty-nine American students involved in his study of public perceptions of the conflict in Northern Ireland constructed Carmen Proetta, a key witness to the shooting of three IRA members in Gibraltar, as a woman of "dubious reputation", perhaps even a *prostitute* - as had many of the British participants. The American students had not, however, been exposed to such allegations through the British media. Rather, they arrived at this conclusion by referring to their (different) cultural context and familiarity with American media coverage of 'sex scandals' in the United States around that time (Miller, 1994). These examples point to just some of the ways in which particular features of viewers' cultural location may effectively intervene in the process whereby media texts are able to set the agenda for public discussion of particular issues.

Wilson (1996) offers a theoretical understanding of this process of cross-cultural reception. He suggests that when cultural texts are 'read' in contexts that differ from that of their production, viewers' lack of contextual knowledge creates gaps or absences in textual semiosis which lead to *indeterminancies* in meaning. In order to construct a coherent reading of the text, viewers must work to 'fill in' the blanks themselves, and do so by drawing on the pool of historical, national, cultural, political, economic and social knowledge they possess as citizen insiders within a different nation and culture. Their receptions consequently reflect the fact that the text is being 'read' within a subtly *different* "system of contrasts, oppositions and differentiations", which may alter and shift its signifying potential in various and

unpredictable ways (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p. 77). These insights are well-supported by the research cited above, which demonstrates that when viewers lack the culturally-specific knowledge of an 'insider', they will often make sense of images and events by reconstituting them in relation to issues, debates, events, and controversies that are pertinent within their *own* cultural sphere.

In the light of this new understanding, the global dominance of American television production and distribution has come to be regarded with a certain degree of resignation rather than suspicion. Instead of perceiving such texts as effectively colonising other nations and robbing them of their cultural 'authenticity', viewers of foreign television programmes are seen to engage in an active process of 'indigenisation', through which unfamiliar cultural references are re-read in relation to viewer's equally specific cultural knowledges and experiences (Morley, 1991). As Shohat and Stam (1996, p. 149) argue, "imported mass culture can also be indigenized, put to local use, given a local accent". This process is described by Crosbie (1993), Buchanan (1993) and Parekowhai (1993) in their respective discussions of the way in which they, and other young New Zealand Maori and Pacific Islanders, have effectively 'indigenised' the identity politics, movies, fashion, music and language of black American youth. Rather than destroying the specificity and distinctiveness of local cultural expressions, then, it is argued that the indigenising consumption of American cultural products may in fact transform and re-signify those products in the service of preserving local cultures, albeit in a reshaped form (Ang, 1991b; Morley, 1991; Lealand, 1994; Bell, 1995).

Having said that, I want to suggest that while it is important to emphasis the active and often creative nature of cross-cultural sense production and to more fully understand what differently-located viewers 'do' when they encounter programmes produced in nations other than their own, it is equally vital not to over-estimate the extent to which 'foreign' texts are indeterminant, and thus the extent to which many viewers find it *necessary* to fill the gaps that emerge in the shift between two different cultural and national contexts. Indeed, existing research indicates that while cultural differences clearly inform audience responses, the depictions of everyday life presented in American television programmes are at times perceived by non-American viewers as 'familiar' and as echoing their own cultural realities (Liebes, 1984; Liebes & Katz, 1989 and 1990; Wilson, 1996)

Wilson (1996), for example, discusses the responses of over sixty Malaysians to extracts from the American talk-show *Oprah Winfrey*, the drama *L.A. Law* and the sitcom *Good Advice*. He examines their identification with, or critical distancing from,

the content of these programmes, and similarly suggests that cultural differences can be sidelined by viewers who experience "a familiar practice and place" when viewing American television programmes (Wilson, 1996, p. 17). In the case of a segment from an *Oprah Winfrey* episode on gender and communication, for example, the Malaysian viewers commented that it aired attitudes and gender stereotypes which they believed existed within both Malaysian and American cultures. These viewers also became considerably involved in Oprah's depiction of the "American everyday", leading Wilson to suggest that

> The hugely disparate locations of home and overseas were forgotten, with contributor's awareness of divergent space temporarily replaced by recognising the proximity of prejudice: "I've gone through that". Here, differences were displaced to the margins by viewers who experienced a familiar practice and place. Identification *can* cross cultures. (Ibid.; original emphasis.)

Taken together, these findings suggest that viewers' perception of a commonality of human experience may sometimes transcend differences of national and cultural location (Wilson, 1996).

Some insight into this phenomena is offered by Meyrowitz (1986), Fitzgerald (1991), Morley (1991), Wark (1994) and Morley and Robins (1995), all of whom discuss the cultural implications of the recent revolution in electronic communications. In his aptly titled work *No Sense of Place*, Meyrowitz (1986) suggests that electronic media, and particularly television, have undermined the traditional association between physical and social location to such an extent that people are no longer 'in' places in the same way. Whereas communities used to be connected geographically, the transnationalism of culture via new technology means that communities can now be 'connected' via satellites and telephone cables, a notion which resonates with Wark's (1994) discussion of 'virtual geography'. Similarly, Morley and Robins suggest that

> what the new technologies make possible is a new kind of relationship between place and space: through their capacity to transgress frontiers and subvert territories, they are implicated in a complex interplay of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation. (Morley & Robins, 1995, p. 75)

According to these theorists, in the process of liberating communities from the confines of their geographic location and 'transporting' them to other places, new technology has displaced what was once a strong sense of belonging to a particular place and culture. As a consequence, Fitzgerald (1991) argues that people's sense of

self or 'identity' is no longer defined by their physical location or membership of a particular geographic or cultural community. Rather, identities can be forged on the basis of other, often more pertinent, aspects of people's multiple identities, such as their political interests and beliefs. According to Giddens, the electronic revolution has thus generated a sense of "integration within globalised 'communities' of shared experience" (Giddens, 1990, cited in Wilson, 1996, p. 16) - a recognition of commonality made possible through the pervasive reach of television and other electronic media. As Morley and Robins (1995, p. 132) suggest, "the media create new 'communities' across their spaces of transmission, bringing together otherwise disparate groups around the common experience of television, and bringing about a cultural mixing of here and there". In an electronic age, being located in a different physical, cultural or nation context to that of a text's production no longer constrains viewers' identifications with representations of cultural 'Others' and their lifestyles (Wilson, 1996).

Significantly, however, it remains the case that it is primarily *American* audio-visual media that are cutting 'horizontally' across the global audience, a fact which for many resurrects the 'spectre of Americanisation'. While the cultural imperialism thesis has been the subject of much disputation within academic quarters, a distinctly negative perception of American popular culture (and particularly popular *television*) persists, especially among Europeans, for some of whom "the very notion of the 'Americanisation' of television now stands for a whole series of associations to do with commercialisation, banality and the destruction of traditional values" (Morley & Robins, 1995, p. 55). Europeans have historically cast America as "traditionless, the land of the material, not the cultural", and its 'new' cultural exports as "brash, crude, unsubtle, mindless and...destructive of taste and tradition" (Ibid., p. 56). By constructing American anti-culture in this way and defining itself in relation to this much inferior 'Other', Morley and Robins (1995) suggest that Europe has preserved its own identity as the bastion of all that is 'cultured' and 'civilised' (Ibid.).

A number of the letter writers in Ang's (1985) study expressed this sort of sentiment. These viewers articulated what this author terms an 'ideology of mass culture' grounded in an 'official' European condemnation and rejection of American television serials. Ang argues that within the cultural context of the Netherlands, American entertainment television is widely regarded as commercially-oriented, schematic, stereotypical and of generally poor quality.[8] She consequently theorises that this cultural aversion to 'mass culture' led many of these Dutch viewers to 'read' *Dallas* ironically as 'bad' *even while* experiencing often immense pleasure from watching and poking fun at it. Similarly, James (1995) explored the reception of American culture

among thirteen mostly highly-educated Hungarians and found that many participants stressed, not the origin of cultural imports, but their quality. A large number also expressed the view that most imported Hollywood movies had little aesthetic value, and that the primary use of American television and films was to relax and be entertained (James, 1995).

Expressions of cultural difference are not, however, confined to negative evaluations of the quality (or lack thereof) of American televisual productions. Research demonstrates that other viewers may highlight cultural differences in the version of 'reality' depicted in American television programmes. Wilson (1996), for example, cites the case of a viewer who perceived the American way of life depicted in *Oprah* as a world apart from, rather than similar to, her own daily reality. Wilson suggests that for some viewers, interpretation and response may be tightly constrained by a veritable "wall" of cultural differences. Further evidence of what he terms cultural 'estrangement' is evident in the responses of some of the participants in Liebes and Katz's research, who distanced themselves and their own culture from the 'Americanness' and 'Americanisms' depicted in *Dallas* (Liebes & Katz, 1989 and 1990).

The insights offered by these and other studies of cross-cultural reception obviously raise a number of important questions pertaining to the present investigation. How would the participants involved in this study make sense of *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato*, given that this episode bears numerous traces of its status as a highly politicised response to Dan Quayle's controversial assertions? What would these viewers, located in the different physical, national and cultural space that is contemporary New Zealand, 'do' with the absences or gaps generated by the many culturally-specific references to American political figures, issues and events that pervade this text? What would viewers in this country make of the discursive position upheld by this episode, given that it is defined through reference to political figures with whom New Zealanders may or may not be familiar? How, and in what ways, is national and cultural difference significant in shaping the identifications and interpretations of New Zealand viewers when encountering American television programmes such as this one?

In attempting to answer these and other questions, chapter VI breaks new ground in charting the processes governing New Zealanders' 'interdiscursive encounters' with the 'foreign' television programming that continues to dominate local broadcasting schedules. Acknowledging the many insights offered within the existing body of knowledge around cross-cultural television reception, it attempts to test their

applicability to this different social, political, economic and cultural context. In this way, it contributes to ongoing discussions around media globalisation and advances our understanding of how local audiences go about making sense of texts that are often alien, yet also familiar. Understanding this process is pivotal to an understanding of the actual and potential role of American entertainment television in that wider cultural process whereby the meanings of 'motherhood' and 'the family' are subject to continual re-negotiation in New Zealand today.

Modes of Reception

It is evident from the above discussions that differently positioned audience members can make a diverse range of readings and interpretations of the 'same' television productions. It is also evident that these readings can be linked (although not *reduced*) to factors such as political interests, experiential insights, demographic and social group membership(s), cultural identities and locations, religious beliefs, access to discourses of the wider social world, personal biography and so forth. Problematically, however, the majority of these studies identify differences in the *content* of viewers' receptions in relation to particular television texts and audience groups (such as receptions of *Dallas* among its Dutch fans, or different receptions of documentaries relating to nuclear energy among different interest groups). Much less attention has been paid to the tenor or *form* of viewers' receptions in terms of identifying the particular perspective underlying the process of sense construction itself. This underlying perspective may in some cases reflect an attunement to features of the depicted reality of a given television programme. Alternatively, it may reflect greater emphasis on the extent of that depicted reality's fit, or lack of fit, with the viewer's own experience of the world. Differently again, this perspective might reflect a heightened sensitivity to features of a programme's aesthetic qualities or generic form. Alternatively, it could reveal a more immediate concern with the propositional content or potential social implications of that message within the wider social realm.

For my present purposes, these different perspectives are understood as representing different *modes* of reception. These modes are in turn held to constitute an inextricable and indeed fundamentally *defining* feature of the *actual* meanings viewers make of television programmes. For this reason, different modes of reception are seen to have major implications for the ability of television programmes to set the agenda for audience receptions. Similarly, the adoption of different modes of reception is seen to have an immediate bearing on the content of the interpretations offered by differently positioned viewers, and thus bears a relationship to differences between and within

viewers according to the intersection of socioeconomic class, gender, ethnicity, age, political interests, religious beliefs, and a multitude of variables relating to life experience and personal biography. The adoption of different modes of reception is also regarded as a key factor in the way in which viewers within a given cultural location go about making sense of television texts produced in an unfamiliar political, economic, social and cultural context. For these reasons, it is argued that the identification of the different modes of reception that may be adopted by viewers in the course of sense production should constitute the first step in any investigation of television's contemporary social significance.

Toward this end, I want to suggest that it is now time to consolidate what reception researchers have learned over the past 25 years. It is time to recognise that areas of commonality can and should be identified between the *modes* of reception that different groups of research participants have adopted under very different conditions, in very different contexts, and in response to a range of television texts. The aim of the following discussion is thus to present a schema of the modes of reception assumed by the 22 participants involved in this research. This model consolidates and expands upon the insights offered by a relatively small group of audience reception researchers who have attempted to develop a model of the different modes adopted by participants in their own studies.

Existing Schemas

One early model is offered by Worth and Gross (1974), and differentiates between what are described as *inferential* and *attributional* readings. According to these theorists, *inferential* readings are those which reveal no acknowledgement of the constructed nature of the text, or the fact that it has been produced by an external author or production team. Such readings consequently infer textual meaning by way of relating the text to real life and treating characters and events depicted in it as naturally occurring phenomena (Worth & Gross, 1974). Conversely, *attributional* readings are those which do recognise that the text has been constructed by an external author, and consequently draw attention to particular textual and aesthetic characteristics, such as conventions of performance, narrative expectations, and intertextual codes (Ibid.). However, while this schema makes a very useful distinction between readings which do, and which do not, demonstrate an awareness of the process of textual construction, it remains limited by its inattention to viewers' readings of the discursive *content* or message of television programmes.

This level of textual semiosis is attended to by Neuman (1982), who distinguishes between *interpretive* and *analytic* decodings. He suggests that *interpretive* decodings

relate "the content of the program to one's own life or broader issues for the community or society" (Neuman, 1982, p. 474). Such readings involve

> consideration of what social, cultural, or organisational factors might have influenced the writers and producers of the program, and in turn how the program might influence the thinking of a typical viewer, as well as the respondent's own sense of the broader meaning, if any, of the program's themes or their relevance to his or her personal situation. (Ibid., p. 474-475)

Neuman identifies three sub-categories of an interpretive decoding, reflecting viewers' perceptions of the "intent", "impact" and "implications" of specific television programmes (Ibid., p. 480). Neuman's second category of decoding, which he terms *analytic*, is similar to Worth and Gross's (1974) notion of an *attributional* reading: both categorisations highlight viewers' recognition that the text is a fictional construction with a meaning encoded into it by its producers. Neuman's analytic decoding involves some evaluation of the quality of "plot, pace, script, acting, or technical elements of the production" (Neuman, 1982, p. 474-475). Three sub-categories of this decoding are identified, reflecting viewers' evaluation of the "general", "generic" and "technical" form of a particular programme (Ibid., p. 480). Problematically however, Neuman's identification of just two modes of decoding limits the analytical scope of this model, particularly since it provides no comparable categorisation of Worth and Gross's (1974) *inferential* reading, discussed above. Having said that, certain elements of his work remain very useful and hence Neuman's *sub*-categories of interpretive and analytic modes of decoding have been variously appropriated in the model of reception outlined below, where they sit alongside elements drawn from a number of alternative schemas.

The most prominent of these alternative schemas is Hall's original encoding/decoding model of communication (outlined in chapter II), which proposes that viewers may make either dominant, negotiated or oppositional decodings of media texts. While acknowledging the many limitations of this model, I wish to reiterate Morley's assertion of its fundamental usefulness, due to its insistence that "readers are...engaged in productive work, but under determinate conditions...supplied by the text, the producing institution and by the social history of the audience" (Morley, 1989, p. 19). I would argue, however, that the true value of this schema has been obscured by the *over-generalised application* of Hall's three categories of decoding, on the basis of a presumption that these can account for the full diversity of audience receptions. The problem here can be demonstrated by briefly reconsidering the most celebrated application of this schema: Morley's *Nationwide* study. I would suggest

that qualitatively different *kinds* of reception are evident in the responses offered by the participants in this study, readings which reflect varying degrees of attunement to *Nationwide*'s particular mode of address, production values, programme content and implicit ideological framework. These different emphases are, however, downplayed as a result of Morley's reliance on a schema which effectively conflates participants' responses to the textual *form* of *Nationwide* with their receptions of its ideological *content* and implicit cultural framework.

Hence, Morley interprets the Bank Managers' lack of engagement with the content of this programme as signifying their acceptance of its 'commonsense' framework as essentially non-controversial, and on this basis categorises their response as a 'dominant' decoding. However, the grounds for such an interpretation are rather flimsy given that, as Morley concedes, these participants focused on *Nationwide*'s mode of address to such an extent that they actually barely commented at all on its "implicit framework". In fact, the Bank Managers actively *resisted* the very notion that this programme could have any such framework, or that it was capable of conveying any message at all, as suggested in comments such as "there wasn't a theme", "all you've picked up are people's reactions...it's not considered", and "it wasn't sufficient" (Morley, 1980b, p. 57). What they *did* articulate instead was an overwhelmingly *negative* perception of this programme as "just a tea-time entertainment programme, embarrassing, patronising, exploiting raw emotion, sensationalism" (Ibid.). Comments such as these reveal a striking attunement to the form of *Nationwide* as a television production, one which in their view exhibits very poor production values in relation to their preferred genre of 'serious current affairs'. Yet Morley classifies this response as a preferred or dominant decoding, a move which confuses the Bank Managers' negative response to *Nationwide* as 'tea-time entertainment' with their position in relation to its underlying ideological framework, about which virtually nothing is revealed by their remarks. Indeed, it seems that any level of engagement with the propositional or message content of this text has been obstructed from the very outset by a heightened attunement to features relating to the form of *Nationwide*, its production values and mode of address. Such attunement is characteristic of a mediated mode of reception, further explanation of which will be offered momentarily.

While a similarly disparaging response to the form of *Nationwide* is offered by the groups of black further education students, Morley interprets their reading as a 'sign' of the disjunction between the cultural codes of their West-Indian, inner-city, working-class communities and that of *Nationwide*, and on this basis classifies them as oppositional decoders. Yet these participants were actually found to engage in a

'critique of silence' and, not unlike the Bank Managers, hardly connected at all with the discourse of *Nationwide*. In fact, Morley notes that "in so far as they make any sense at all of the items some of them at times come close to accepting the programme's own definitions" (Ibid., p. 63). Thus it seems that when these participants did actually engage with the content of these programmes, their decodings were not strictly 'oppositional' ones after all. Furthermore, their responses are consistent with those of the Bank Managers in that they highlight various features relating to *Nationwide* status as a television production for criticism. For these viewers, Nationwide is rejected because "it's not interesting at all", and "they beat about the bush...they say it and then repeat it.... *Today*'s shorter...and then there's *Crossroads* on after" (Ibid., p. 58).

If, as Morley contends, such remarks are indicative of a disjunction between the cultural codes of these West-Indian, inner-city, working-class groups and those implicit in *Nationwide*, then one has to wonder why no such disjunction evidently exists in the case of *Crossroads* or *Today*, which these participants classed as "good TV", as "defined in terms of *enjoyment* and *entertainment*" (Ibid.; emphasis added). The point here is that once again, Morley presumes that readings which are framed in terms of an attunement to the *form* of *Nationwide* offer some kind of insight into viewers' positions in relation to its implicit cultural codes and propositional content. It is my contention that these different approaches to sense production should be regarded as indicative of two very different *modes* of reception - modes which reflect varying levels of attunement to textual *form* and message *content*.

In these terms, a rather more judicious use of the categories of dominant, negotiated and oppositional decoding would limit their scope to that of charting the positions adopted by viewers in relation to the manifest and latent cultural codes and propositional content of media messages, in terms of the extent to which they agree or disagree with the discursively-grounded assertions it makes. Such positions cannot be simply deduced on the basis of viewers' responses to a programmes' mode of address, as Morley has attempted to do. The three categories offered by the encoding/decoding model are clearly unsuited to accommodating the various modes of reception that can be adopted by differently positioned viewers, and hence alternative schemas are required to supplement them.

Among these alternative schemas is that suggested by Richardson and Corner (1986), who differentiate between two modes of reading employed by viewers in attempting to make sense of the BBC2 documentary programme, *A Fair Day's Fiddle*. The first framework, which they term a *mediation* reading, resonates with Neuman's sub-

category of 'intent' within the interpretive decoding, since both denote the viewer's attribution of an intention or motivation to a programme's producers. One respondent in this study, for example, suggests that a scene in which a little boy interacts verbally with his mother while playing with his toys is 'fabricated' or constructed artificially because "[the producers] are *trying to keep things natural*" (Corner & Richardson, 1986, p. 149; emphasis added).

In contrast to this is the second interpretative framework - a *transparency* reading - which these authors describe as one which comments on the text as though it were directly perceived. Transparency readings, in other words, assess and comment on the people and events depicted in television texts as though they were *immediately* experienced, rather than only encountered 'second-hand', and mediated by the process of editing and various other formal conventions and constraints of television production (Richardson & Corner, 1986). Clearly, this category covers similar territory to the *inferential* reading mode identified by Worth and Gross (1974) and discussed above. Much like that earlier study, however, the schema offered by Richardson and Corner provides insufficient means of conceptualising viewers' interpretations of, and responses to, the ideological *content* of television programmes, although to be fair they do account for viewers' identification of a "manipulative" motivation behind such productions (Richardson & Corner, 1986, p. 163).

The nature of an inferential/transparency reading would appear to be clarified somewhat in Schrøder's (1986) discussion of what she terms *strong* and *indicative involvement*. In her analysis of Danish viewers' involvement in, and distance from, the American soap opera *Dynasty*, Schrøder describes *strong involvement* as necessitating a suspension of 'disbelief' and a denial of the constructed nature of the narrative, both of which are needed in order to grant the purely fictional the status of 'real life', even if only temporarily for the purpose of allowing viewers to enter into the fiction and partake of its pleasures. Schrøder also describes a mode of involvement she terms *indicative*, in which characters are evaluated "from the perspective of *like-us-ness*" (Schrøder, 1986, p. 70). She suggests that this form of involvement may be expressed in either explicit comparisons between the fictional and real world, or more implicitly in slippages between events, experiences and problems depicted on screen and those residing within the wider context of reception. This work seems to imply that a distinction should be made between two different types of inferential or 'transparency' reading. In the first instance, one which regards the 'reality' constructed by a television text as a discrete and coherent 'world of its own' and evaluates it on its own terms. Secondly, one which regards this textual 'reality' as standing *alongside* the real material world and as being similar and/or different to it in

any of its aspects, and which consequently evaluates this 'reality' in relation to persons, objects and institutions within the real world. This distinction is retained and indeed solidified in the model of reception outlined below.

Dahlgren (1988) offers a somewhat different set of categorisations in documenting viewers' use of what he terms *official* and *personal* modes of discourse in their talk about television news programmes. A number of the respondents in this study who adopted an *official* mode also articulated what Dahlgren describes as a discourse of "media awareness/demystification" (Dahlgren, 1988, p. 210-211), which evidently reflected their awareness of various elements of televisual production. As demonstrated above, such awareness is also a key feature of an *attributional reading, analytic decoding*, and *mediation reading*. What Dahlgren adds to this discussion is his insight that in articulating this discourse (or rather, adopting this mode of viewing), viewers are able to assume one of two positions, "either a critical-intellectual stance or that of a 'show-biz fan'"(Ibid., p. 211). In other words, such readings may in some cases be neutral or perhaps even negative in tone, while in other cases they may be framed more positively. According to Dahlgren, media awareness/demystification discourse may also reveal a viewer's understanding of the news as *motivated discourse*, a notion which obviously resonates with concepts proffered by Neuman and also Richardson and Corner concerning viewers' perception of the *intentions* of producers.

In more informal contexts, Dahlgren found a tendency for individuals to use various modes of what he terms *personal* discourse, including that of *trivial/random personal association* (Ibid.), in which viewers make commonplace associations with their own life experience. While I reject Dahlgren's suggestion that such associations are in any way trivial, there are clear parallels between this concept and the categories of *inferential reading* and *indicative involvement* discussed above. Dahlgren also offers the useful insight that television news itself facilitates multiple subjectivities which viewers can mobilise in different settings, thus recognising the poststructuralist re-conceptualisation of the nature of human subjectivity outlined in chapter II. In his view, the 'dispersed' nature of human subjectivity means that viewers may give different or even inconsistent accounts in different contexts, and can shift between fundamentally different modes of discourse in the process (Ibid.). This idea of viewers shifting between different modes of reception will be revisited at a later point.

The most significant and substantial work to date in this area is unquestionably that of Liebes and Katz (1986, 1989 and 1990), who identify two distinct modes of reading in their analysis of cross-cultural receptions of *Dallas*. The first, a *referential* reading,

is one which makes connections between the fictional 'reality' depicted on screen and the viewer's own knowledge and experience of the world. Commonality is evident here between this category and those of an *inferential reading*, *indicative involvement* and *trivial/random personal association* outlined above. For viewers reading in a *referential* mode, characters are related to as though they were real individuals; in turn, these characters are related to people and situations in the viewer's own life world (Liebes & Katz, 1990).

The second mode of reading identified by these authors, which they term a *critical* mode, extends and clarifies the terrain variously charted by the categories *attributional reading, interpretive* and *analytic decodings*, *mediation reading* and *media awareness/demystification discourse*. While the use of the term 'critical' is in many ways problematic,[9] it is used by these authors to denote the adoption of an informed or analytic perspective, which is seen to induce a remote or distanced approach in particular viewers. For Liebes and Katz, "the critical...frames discussions of the programme as a fictional construction with aesthetic rules" (Ibid., p. 100). Most usefully, Liebes and Katz identify two distinct types of critical reading - *semantic* and *syntactic*. For these theorists, *semantic* criticism takes the form of inferences about a television programme's ideological theme or message, and may also be expressed in comments about the rhetorical motivations or aims of producers. Offering additional insight into the nature of this reading mode, Livingstone and Lunt (1994) suggest that *semantic criticism* may be manifested in remarks about the coherence of a particular argument, the adequacy of the 'evidence' presented in support of particular rhetorical claims, and the motivations underlying the presentation of certain characters or textual content. They suggest that this mode may also be expressed in viewers' identifications of what could (and perhaps should) have been said, but was not.

In its *syntactic* element, Liebes and Katz (1986, 1989 and 1990) suggest that being 'critical' implies viewers' recognition that the text is produced or constructed, a knowledge which may be expressed in comments about the formal conventions of a genre, narrative formula, the dramatic function of characters or events, or the possible imperatives and constraints involved in production. For these theorists, this is a somewhat *distanced* viewing mode in which viewers 'step back' from the 'reality' of the text. It implies a less involved style of viewing and thereby offers some degree of protection from its ideological content or intended message (Liebes & Katz, 1986). Viewers' critical ability is therefore regarded as a safeguard against any potential media 'effects', on the grounds that if audiences are more aware and critical of television texts, then they apparently are not passive sponges who will simply absorb televisual messages and may even actively engage in resisting them (Ibid.). Problematically,

however, this notion that viewers' increasingly critical *awareness* of the form and imperatives of televisual production implies a similarly critical response to the *content* or *agenda* of television texts relies on an erroneous conflation of viewers' readings of form and content. It is argued here that, on the contrary, such 'protection' is only implied by the *second* activity, which Liebes and Katz term *semantic* criticism. Viewers' recognition of the text as a construction does not, in other words, offer any kind of 'defence' against the ideological content of a text.

Indeed, as Dahlgren (1988) suggests, such readings may be made from the point of view of a showbiz fan. This mode of critical distance may even allow the 'message' of the text to pass unchallenged, as was the case with the American participants in Liebes and Katz's own study, whose 'criticisms' were typically directed at the *form* of *Dallas* and who consequently argued that it in fact carried no message at all, since it was "just entertainment, only escape" (Liebes & Katz, 1989, p. 211). In the domain of agendas and messages, the authors suggest that the Americans are *resistant* rather than critical and may consequently be even more "vulnerable to manipulation" than non-American viewers (Ibid.). What the authors fail to recognise is that their notion of 'critical' reading is problematised by such a finding, as it reveals that syntactic criticisms of *form* may co-exist with an overall acceptance of the semantic or ideological *content* of a text.

Liebes and Katz's conflation of these two sites of 'critical' evaluation is rejected on these grounds. While both *syntactic* and *semantic* critical elements are retained, they are deployed somewhat differently and as features of two distinct modes of response in the model of audience reception outlined below. In terms of this model, the only form of critical reading which is seriously capable of resisting or opposing the semantic or implicit ideological *content* of a text is one which challenges that content directly in terms of its ideological or discursive grounding. This notion of 'critical' reception is considered exclusively in relation to the latent (as opposed to manifest) message of the text. In these terms, a critical reading is one which resists, subverts or opposes outright what is presumed *by the viewer him or herself* to be the *latent* message of a text, one which reads 'against the grain' and perhaps even redefines the agenda and meaning of the text in terms that reflect the reader's own social, cultural, economic, political and moral affiliations and interests (Hall, 1980a; Morley, 1980b; Roscoe et al., 1995).

Taking a somewhat different approach to that adopted by the above authors, Höijer (1992) draws on insights from cognitive theory to chart the influence of mental representations or cognitive structures on audience reception. She identifies three

realms of accumulated experience represented in the cognitive structures of individual viewers, and illustrates the way in which these are used as interpretive frames of reference (cognitive schema) in the process of meaning construction.[10] While Höijer grounds her work in cognitive theory, parallels can be drawn between her identification of the use of experience as an interpretive frame of reference and the categories of *inferential reading, indicative involvement, trivial/random personal association* and *referential reading* outlined above. Her categories of experience are, however, too problematic to be retained in their present form in the model of audience reception outlined below. Equally problematic is her implicit suggestion that human experience is in some way translated into fixed psychological representations or cognitive structures which become privileged interpretive frames of reference. This notion does not sit well with the poststructuralist grounding of this study, which highlights the role of language in constructing human experiences of the world and mediating both their mental representation and subsequent re-articulation.

As should be evident from the above discussion, the similarities between these different schemas are in many cases quite substantial, and it is suggested that their areas of divergence do not necessarily imply any serious incompatibility. Indeed, these models appear amenable to some degree of consolidation in many respects, a move which has the potential to forge very fruitful connections between a number of related areas of investigation within the field of reception research. Toward this end, the following section presents a composite model of reception 'modes' which brings together and extends upon four key areas of commonality within the existing schemas discussed above, and which gives due recognition to the capacity for differently positioned viewers to approach the process of meaning construction in a number of different ways. This model aims, in other words, to acknowledge that viewers' readings reflect varying degrees of involvement in, and distance from, television programmes, along with varying degrees of attunement to their form and/or discursive content. It is suggested that this capacity in turn has important implications for any consideration of the social significance of American entertainment television in local debates around 'motherhood' and 'the family', a point which will be extensively illustrated in chapters VI, VII and VIII.

Modes of Audience Reception: A Composite Model

The model summarised in Figure 21 below differentiates between four distinct modes of reception, these being *transparent, referential, mediated* and *rhetorical* modes, and identifies various sub-categories within each. Further explanation is then offered of the specific nature and tenor of each category of response.

Figure 21: Modes of audience reception

Transparent	**Mediated**
'text *as* life'	**'text as a *production*'** i) Textual aesthetics ii) Generic form iii) Intentionality • *Textual* • *Generic* • *Industry-based*
Referential	**Rhetorical**
'text as *like* life' i) Personal experience/ individual biography ii) Immediate life world experience iii) Experience and knowledge of the wider social/ political/ economic/ cultural/ national/ international context of production or reception	**'text as *message*'** i) Analytical • *Identification* • *Motivation* • *Implication* ii) Evaluative • *Preferred* • *Negotiated* • *Oppositional* iii) Critical

Close <---------> **Distant**
(Quality of the relationship between text and viewer)

Transparent Mode: 'Text *as* Life'

My understanding of this mode of reception draws on three of the categories of response discussed above, these being the form of *inferential* reading identified by Worth and Gross (1974), Richardson and Corner's (1986) concept of a *transparency* reading, and Schrøder's (1986) notion of *strong involvement.* Consolidating these

existing understandings, a *transparent* mode of reading can be understood as one where viewers assess and comment on persons and events depicted in television programmes as though they were *not* in fact encountered through the mediations of narrative construction, writing and editing and textual/generic form. On this basis, programmes are related to and evaluated on their *own* terms and according to their own *internal* logic. In the case of non-fiction programming, persons and events are treated as transparent reflections of an external real world, a reading which relies on a belief in the accuracy and truthfulness of depictions which are presented as undistorted reflections of reality. In the case of fiction programming, viewers may temporarily suspend disbelief and grant fictional worlds the status of 'real life', or a realistic 'slice of life', even if only temporarily for the purpose of entering into the fiction and deriving pleasure from it. The quality of the relationship between text and viewer is thus characterised by closeness or a lack of separation, and while viewers are generally aware that it is 'only a television programme', slippages may sometimes occur between fictional depictions and the everyday realities of viewers.

So, for example, when watching a fictional production, viewers in this mode might draw on evidence supplied by the text itself to 'explain' events and the actions and motivations of characters who, like real human beings, have a personal 'history' (within the life world of the programme, at least). Where such potential explanations are lacking or unknown to the viewer, they may well invent them, but do so in a way which does not interrupt the coherence of the fictional life world. In other words, their explanations 'make sense' within the terms laid down by the text itself, and propose realistic explanations for purely fictional occurrences. Both the content and form of a transparent reception is *qualitatively different* to that produced by someone who has adopted a referential, mediated or rhetorical mode.

Referential Mode - 'Text as *Like* Life'

My understanding of this second mode of reception draws on the categories of *inferential reading* (Worth & Gross, 1974), *indicative involvement* (Schrøder, 1986), *trivial/random personal association* (Dahlgren, 1988), and *referential reading* (Liebes & Katz, 1986, 1989 and 1990). Whereas a transparent mode is one in which viewers relate to television texts on their own terms as unmediated reflections of real life or coherent fictional worlds of their own, a referential mode is understood as one in which viewers perceive the text as standing *alongside* the real world and make comparisons and analogies between that 'world' and their own knowledge and experience of the 'real' world. Viewers are able to draw from three 'pools' or sources of information in adopting this mode of reception, and may use this information to affirm, contest, or simply comment on the accuracy of textual depictions of people and

events and the version of reality presented, according to a perceived fit or lack of fit with their own experiences, observations and knowledges.

One source of information is each viewer's personal history or individual biography, which includes their stock of experiences of childhood, adulthood and parenthood, personal and familial relationships. Another source of referential information available to viewers is that of their immediate life world experience, including their experiences and observations of people such as extended family members, friends, neighbours, colleagues and acquaintances, their involvement in activities and concerns related to their participation in the public sphere through education and employment, and that complex matrix of their social group memberships and social, cultural, political, economic interests and affiliations. Hence, even viewers with no personal experience that is immediately relevant to the content of a given text may draw on the experiences of others within their own life world to assess the accuracy of textual depictions. The third source of referential information is that provided by viewers' individual experience and knowledge of the wider macro sphere in which they live, and/or in which a given television programme was produced. Such information may take the form of knowledge and experience of local, national and international events, economic and political systems and controversies, social policy, contemporary social issues, mainstream public opinion, and social and cultural norms in their own country and that of textual production.

Mediated Mode - 'Text as a *Production*'

My understanding of a mediated mode of reception draws on insights derived from the categories of *attributional reading* (Worth & Gross, 1974), *analytic decoding* (Neuman, 1982), *mediation reading* (Corner & Richardson, 1986), *media awareness/ demystification discourse* (Dahlgren, 1988), and *syntactic criticism* (Liebes & Katz, 1986, 1989 and 1990) outlined above. Consolidating and refining these existing schemas, I suggest that what distinguishes a mediated mode of reading from a transparent or referential mode is its implicit or explicit recognition of the constructed nature of the text as a televisual production. Mediated readings are thus characterised by a more distant or separate relationship between text and viewer, and while such readings may disparage the quality of textual production, particularly generic features of it, or the perceived intentions behind its production, these are not critical readings in the sense used here. Viewers in this mode draw on (often quite considerable) knowledge of particular aspects of television production, generic conventions, and the functions and motivations of the industry itself as a commercial enterprise. At times, this knowledge may interrupt the process of identification and/or mitigate against viewers' engagement with the discursive content of television programmes, thereby

working against any attempt to influence public opinion through its 'message'. Three sub-categories within the broader notion of a mediated mode of reading can be identified.

A mediated mode of reception with an *aesthetic* focus is one in which a viewer draws attention to features of technical production, such as narrative construction, plot, pace, comic timing, scriptwriting, performance and characterisation, the dramatic function of characters, and the constraints placed on production and scheduling. Such receptions may also take the form of an evaluation of the quality (or lack thereof) of such features. In comparison, a mediated mode with a focus on the *generic form* of the text is one which draws on existing knowledge of generic conventions, such as narrative formula and characterisation. Such readings may use other texts of the same genre or other episodes of the same series as interpretive frames of reference, or even texts of other genres. The third type of mediated reception is one which draws on existing perceptions of the *intentions* and motivations of television producers in terms of meeting various textual, generic and industry-based imperatives. Viewers may, for example, perceive that the producers of a television programme have constructed certain textual features in particular ways for distinct reasons, such as the need to generate humour, interest or drama *within the text itself.* Alternatively, viewers may draw on their understanding of certain generic imperatives in attempting to make sense of particular textual elements, such as the need for programmes *of that genre* to inform, entertain, amuse or educate. Differently again, viewers may express an awareness of the text as reflecting the *industry-based* motivations of its producers, and hence as having a specific purpose such as attracting a lucrative viewing audience for advertisers in order to generate profit.

Rhetorical Mode - 'Text as *Message'*

My understanding of this fourth and final mode of reception draws variously from the categories of *preferred, negotiated* and *oppositional* reading (Hall, 1980a), *interpretive decoding* (Neuman, 1982), *manipulative intent* (Richardson & Corner, 1986), and *semantic criticism* (Liebes & Katz, 1986, 1989 and 1990). Whereas a mediated reception highlights issues related to the *form* of television texts, *rhetorical* receptions are those which specifically address either the manifest or latent *discursive content* or message of a particular programme. Accounts framed in this mode presume that the text is 'pushing a particular barrow', and may identify and *analyse* the discursive position taken by the producers of the text, or alternatively *evaluate* it in light of the viewer's own position. A third category of response, a *critical* rhetorical mode, is one which resists, subverts or opposes outright what is presumed by the viewer him or herself to be the latent message of a text.

While some viewers in an *analytical* rhetorical mode of reception may simply identify a message or rhetorical argument within the text, others may comment on its nature, logic and coherence, or on the adequacy of any evidence given in support of particular rhetorical claims. Other viewers may identify what *was not* articulated by a programme but could, or indeed *should*, have been said. Analytical rhetorical readings may also reflect viewers' consideration of the *motivation* behind the message, and may be framed in terms of the perceived political or discursive aims of the producers in promoting a certain message and their representation of particular characters or events in a programme. In this view, programme producers are seen as biased in a particular direction, and as attempting to persuade viewers to adopt their favoured position. Viewers in this mode may thus comment negatively or positively on the ideas or feelings the producers hoped to instil in the audience. Some may express a negatively-framed conception of the text as having a specific purpose in terms of exerting influence within the social or political sphere, or as Richardson and Corner (1986) term it, having a *manipulative intent.* According to these authors, readers in this mode may suggest that in the process, the producers of the programme have (perhaps deliberately) distorted reality in some way, and are attempting to deceive viewers in order to secure their own political or ideological intentions. Conversely, the motivations of programme-makers may be regarded more positively as *progressive* and as revealing a previously denied reality or 'truth'. A third form of analytical rhetorical reading is one which highlights the possible *implications* of the message for the wider community or society and its political, social or moral ramifications (Neuman, 1982). Readers in this mode may comment on the impact of the programme on their own thoughts or emotions, and may speculate about the programme's possible effect on other, perhaps more susceptible viewers.

The second major category within the rhetorical mode is an *evaluative* rhetorical mode. Such receptions effectively constitute the discursive response of viewers to the manifest propositional content of the "text as message" and its broader discursive orientation. Evaluating the textual message in relation to their unique stock of prior beliefs, assumptions and discursive allegiances, viewers may adopt one of three positions in relation to that message. Some may affirm the propositional content of the text and offer a *preferred* reading of it, as some analysts have implied by the term 'non-critical'. Other viewers may agree only in part and offer a *negotiated* reading, perhaps drawing on different assumptions and discourses to reject some aspects of the message while accepting others. Alternatively, a lack of fit between the propositional content of the text and the beliefs, assumptions, knowledges, and discursive allegiances of particular viewers may provide grounds for a contestation or refutation of the text's propositional content, expressed in an *oppositional* reading.

The third category, a *critical* rhetorical reception, is one which resists, subverts or opposes outright the *latent* message of a text, one which goes beyond expressing simple acceptance or disagreement with its manifest propositional content. Critical readings are ones which read 'against the grain' and perhaps even redefine the agenda and meaning of the text in terms that reflect the reader's own social, cultural, economic, political and moral affiliations and interests (Hall, 1980a; Morley, 1980a; Roscoe et al., 1995). In these terms, a critical reading is one which rejects the text's privileged latent meanings and makes sense of it in a way which is critical of or even opposes its implicit ideological message. As Morley suggests, the coherence of viewers' critical readings depends on the degree to which they have access to an alternative interpretative framework.

Commuting Viewers

In detailing these four distinct modes of reception, I am not necessarily suggesting that *whole* accounts can be defined as typifying a transparent, referential, mediated, or rhetorical mode of response, although some accounts may indeed reflect the *dominance* of one or more modes. Rather, my aim is to begin the process of constructing a typology of the different reception modes that can be adopted *at particular moments* by viewers during the course of sense production. Schrøder's notion of *commuting* provides a useful means of conceptualising the process through which viewers shift between different modes of reception, and can be applied beyond her (somewhat limited) use of it to explain the bipolar movement between involvement and distance.

Paraphrasing Schrøder's explanation and extending the scope of its application, the notion of *commuting* reflects a recognition that the experience of the viewer cannot be confined to any one of the modes of reception identified above. On the contrary, each viewer *commutes* between these different frames, a notion which is comparable to the "playful consciousness" described by Wilson (1996, p. 12) as a movement "between being informed and entertained, between constructing and deconstructing meaning, or between identifying, and discovering a critical distance". In terms of this understanding, even those viewers who exhibit a high degree of involvement and make largely transparent or referential readings may have moments of critical distance to certain aesthetic, generic or rhetorical features of a programme. By the same token, even those whose basic viewing experience is marked by attunement to the form of a text or opposition to its discursive orientation may have moments of engagement in the fictional or real-life drama (Schrøder, 1986). For Schrøder, these experiences of involvement and distance may be "*simultaneous* and interdependent, yet still separate" (Ibid., p. 77).

Ample evidence of this commuting process can be found in the responses of the participants in this study. Matthew, for example, initially adopts a *referential* mode and contests the depiction of Murphy as struggling to cope on her own as inaccurate, *on the grounds that it is inconsistent with his own personal experience of parenthood*, in which extended family members have always been on hand to assist his own partner during this early period of uncertainty with a new baby:

> *Why do you think Murphy had such a hard time coping with her baby?*
> Well...*when my partner's had a child...there's always been other people around...like grandparents...to help out,* especially in...the basic crafts of motherhood, and...from that programme she was doing that all on her own without any input from any other woman who'd shared the experience, I mean the advice that she got was both from guys...

Matthew then immediately shifts to a *mediated* mode of reading in which he demonstrates an attunement to *textual aesthetics*, in this case the *characterisation* of Murphy Brown:

> ...I don't know why they did that, whether it was *because they wanted to portray her as being a stronger character* by not having help from another woman. I don't know...

Commuting once again, Matthew then slips back into a *referential* mode of reading:

> ...They didn't have any women throughout that programme come along and say 'well, look you know this is'...except one nanny who came in and said, 'oh you've just had a baby'.... *From my experience of things...you'd have some family around to help you. You wouldn't be looking at hiring a nanny the day that you came out of hospital to go back to work...*

Almost immediately, however, Matthew commutes to an *analytical rhetorical* mode of reading which highlights the *political intentions of the producers* in depicting Murphy as struggling along on her own:

> ...I guess *they...could have constructed the programme like that, to capitalise on the opportunities given to them by Dan Quayle*...making these statements.... I don't know what the timing of all that was really. Perhaps it sought to do that...

Matthew finally shifts back to a *mediated* mode of reception and draws attention to the *generic form* of this text in acknowledging the *centrality of the situation to the comedy* of this programme, and hence the need for Murphy to find a nanny and return relatively quickly to her workplace environment:

> ...And *I guess that in terms of being a situation comedy, a lot of it is situated in that television studio....* That's kind of where it's got to take place so*...it's important to have Murphy Brown move back into that environment for the programme.* That's the stage, where it takes place. (Matthew; emphasis added)

Significantly, each of the modes of reception adopted by Matthew offers an alternative means of making sense of particular textual 'information'. Depending on the mode adopted at any particular moment, Murphy's difficulties in coping with her new-born child can be variously understood as unrealistic when compared with Matthew's own personal experience of parenthood; or alternatively, as a reflection of the desire of producers to characterise Murphy as a strong and independent woman; or differently again, as a product of their desire to capitalise on the opportunity given them by Quayle to make a political point; or alternatively, as symptomatic of the constraints and conventions of sitcom as a genre.

Conclusion

While existing schemas of audience reception have clearly laid the necessary groundwork for the consolidated model offered here, none adequately charts the relationship between viewers' assumption of particular modes of reception and the various social and cultural variables identified above, such as socioeconomic class, gender, ethnicity, political interests. Corner and Richardson, for example, neglect to link the use of what they term different frameworks of interpretation to the social location and group membership(s) of differently positioned viewers, because as they themselves point out, the scale of their research was "too small for us to correlate interpretative accounts with socio-demographic variables" (Corner & Richardson, 1986, p. 159). Similarly, the work of Liebes and Katz has been criticised by Tulloch for failing to attend to "power dimensions of class, gender, age, religion and ethnicity" (Tulloch, 1990, p. 212), an oversight which leads them to conceive the different receptions they identify as manifest expressions of dominant cultural differences. And while Neuman (1982) does successfully link modes of decoding to educational achievement, the contribution of many of these studies tends to be confined to the largely uncritical identification and categorisation of the different modes of reading adopted by individual respondents.

It is also suggested, however, that a critical theory of audience reception must go beyond this initial classificatory process to discuss the relationship between modes of reception and viewers' positionings within the macro social, economic, political, and cultural context, and also the more immediate micro context of their individual receptions. The assumption of transparent, referential, mediated and rhetorical modes of reception needs to be linked, in other words, to the intersection between categories such as gender, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic class, political interests, religious beliefs, personal biography and access to discourses of the wider social world. Chapters VI and VII attempt to make precisely those links in examining the relationship between social group memberships, modes of reading and New Zealanders' receptions of *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato.*

Before proceeding with that discussion, I should note that the table in Appendix H offers more immediate insight into the relationship between each participants' primary modes of reception, their relevant social and interest group memberships, and the main discursive repertoires drawn on in constructing sense of this American sitcom episode. As this table suggests, distinct clusterings of reception are evident in relation to a number of social and interest group membership(s). The adoption of a *referential* mode of reading, for instance, appears to be related to participants' membership of the social groups 'parent' or 'solo mother', and comprised a primary mode of reception for parents Greg, Barbara, Don, Irene, Matthew, Jill and Melanie, as it also did for solo mothers Elizabeth, Julie and Maeve. A rather more tentative link can also be made between the adoption of a referential mode of reading and *age* in the case of Don and Irene. Easily the oldest participants in this study, Don and Irene took significantly longer to interview than other participants, primarily because they very frequently related this text to their diverse stock of personal and life world experiences and used their own pasts as a guide to making sense of the contemporary issues depicted in this episode. As discussed above, this tendency was also found by Willis (1995) among elderly participants in the BFI Audience Tracking Study. A tentative link can also be made between level of education and the adoption of a *mediated* mode of reading by John, Marjory, Yuan, Kimi, Paul and Sue, all of whom possess some form of tertiary qualification. This is consistent with the findings of Morley (1980a), Höijer (1986 and 1990) and Liebes and Katz (1989), who suggest that critical distance and a concern with textual aesthetics are most typical of highly-educated viewers.

On somewhat firmer ground, the adoption of an *analytical rhetorical* mode appears most immediately linked to political and religious group membership. This comprised a primary mode of reading among those participants with overtly left-wing political views (Irene, Maeve and Matthew) as well as those with strong religious convictions

(Melanie, Sue and Courtney). However, while the same *mode* of reading is adopted by these two groups of participants, the concerns underlying their responses are obviously very different. Religious group membership also appears to be the common denominator among those participants whose primary mode of reception was a *negotiated* or *oppositional evaluative rhetorical* mode (as in the cases of David, Jill, Melanie, Sue and Courtney). This is consistent with Hall's hypothesis that viewers who have access to an alternative interpretative framework may potentially reject the text's privileged meaning and make sense of it in a way which opposes or negotiates its ideological message. In this case, strong religious views appear to have provided these participants with an alternative discursive framework with which to counter the liberal-humanist affirmation of alternative family structures in this episode.

The following chapters explore in greater depth the relationship between cultural location, modes of reception, social group memberships and participants' receptions of the form and content of this episode in greater detail. Chapter VI considers the role of national and cultural differences in shaping the nature of the encounter between this American sitcom text and the New Zealand participants in this study. Chapter VII explores participants' respective abilities to identify with Murphy as the central narrative protagonist, their responses to its depiction of (single) motherhood, and their evaluations of this episode's liberal-humanist affirmation of alternative family structures. Each of these different aspects is considered in relation to the ability of *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* to 'set the agenda' for viewers' receptions and to define and delimit how these issues are conceived and talked about.

The analysis presented in these chapters thus reflects the position that understanding meaning production at the point of reception provides the key to understanding the role of American entertainment television in the social reconstruction of 'motherhood' and 'the family' in New Zealand today. That is to say, the wider social significance of such programming cannot be determined by examining these texts themselves, nor by highlighting the specificity of this geo-political context in relation to that of production. Rather, that social significance is determined somewhere within the circuit of exchanges that occur as specific texts, produced and read within specific contexts of production and reception, are 'made sense of' by socially- and culturally-located viewers. While these texts clearly work to establish certain parameters for audience receptions of their content, both cultural location and social group membership(s) provide New Zealand viewers with access to experiences, knowledges and discourses of the wider social world that potentially enable them to contest and even reject the privileged meanings of American entertainment programming. In this way, both American television programming and viewers in this country play an active and

constitutive role in that ongoing social process whereby the meanings of 'motherhood' and 'the family' are continually renegotiated in New Zealand today. The *nature* of that role, however, is primarily determined at the moment of reception, and hence it is this moment to which our attention now turns.

VI

Cross-Cultural Encounters

Introduction

This chapter examines how viewers located within this national and cultural location received and made sense of the American sitcom episode *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato*. It suggests that the role of American entertainment television in discursive struggles around 'motherhood' and 'the family' here in New Zealand is interceded by two related phenomenon. The first is the often violent clash between the *aesthetic values* implicit in popular American television productions and those of some viewers in this country. This clash is registered at the level of textual *form*, unlike the second phenomenon which is registered at the level of textual *content*. Here I am referring to the presence of a marked tension between local viewers' recognition of similarities and differences between the 'reality' depicted in American entertainment television and their own everyday lives. Both phenomena are equally worthy of investigation, since both impinge upon the actual and potential social significance of American entertainment television in New Zealand today. The present chapter thus firstly presents the findings of an investigation into New Zealanders' receptions of the *form* of this episode as an American production in the genre of sitcom. It then turns to examine the tension between their respective experiences of 'familiarity' and 'estrangement' in relation to this episode's narrative content; content which inevitably draws on, and refers, to the wider national, cultural, political, economic, social and discursive context of its production in the United States in 1992. Acknowledging the significance of the contextual shift between this episode's American production and its reception here in New Zealand in 1995, this chapter also identifies some of the *strategies* for sense production employed by cross-cultural viewers when encountering television texts produced in a distant 'elsewhere'.

(Not) Watching That American Trash

> There is a lexicon of phraseology - perhaps even clichés - which are reserved for American television imports, seen as 'mindless', 'shallow', 'junk', 'inane', 'pap', and 'bland, brainless and boring'. (Lealand, 1988, p. 51)

Of the constant flow of television programming imported into New Zealand from the United States, perhaps none is so consistently derided as the American sitcom. Somewhat ironically, if we are to believe the ratings, neither is any other American television genre as enduringly popular among the general New Zealand audience. The responses offered by the participants in this study clearly reflect the ambivalence (and indeed, distaste) with which American sitcoms are often regarded among different sections of this national audience, an ambivalence which is clearly shaped by hegemonic notions of what constitutes 'quality' in television production.[1] That fact that everyone had something to say about sitcoms is indicative of the sheer volume of American sitcoms that have screened in New Zealand over the years. But while most viewers seemed to accept and even enjoy *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* on its own terms, others were highly critical of it, both in light of its formal or aesthetic properties, and also its status as a specifically *American* cultural production. Among the many colourful adjectives used to describe American sitcoms (and in some cases, this particular episode) were "corny", "brash", "loud", "over the top", "moronic", "rubbish", "obvious", "over-dramatised", "predictable", "over-exaggerated", "unrealistic", "superficial" and "crap".

Not unlike the participants in Ang's (1985) study, who were highly critical of certain aesthetic features of the American soap opera *Dallas*, many of those involved in this research expressed criticisms of particular generic characteristics of American sitcom. It is interesting to note, however, that such criticisms were articulated even by those participants who reported that they did not include sitcoms among their regular viewing repertoire, and indeed claimed to actively avoid watching texts of this genre. This suggests that even while such participants presumably had little first-hand knowledge of television sitcoms, they were able to draw on a particular *cultural understanding* of them. The pervasive influence of this shared cultural understanding evidently provided these participants with access to a stock of phrases and concepts with which to deride texts of this genre, as Lealand (1988) notes above. Indeed, it seemed that the use of these phrases and concepts as descriptors for texts of this genre has become naturalised to the point that a negative construction of American sitcoms now forms part of many New Zealander's common-sense understanding of the world around them. American sitcoms are, in other words, so *obviously* corny, over the top, moronic, predictable, unrealistic, and superficial that it is not necessary to actually *watch* them to confirm the accuracy of such an assessment. Moreover, any subsequent encounter with texts of this genre is liable to be coloured by this pre-existing and very disparaging construction of them.

This was indeed the case with at least three of the participants in this study, whose responses to *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* appeared to be negatively framed from the moment they witnessed its opening credits. In the accounts of Yuan, and to a lesser extent Marjory and John, notions of 'quality television' become fused with a heightened attunement to cultural differences and the constructed nature of this episode as an American television production. This attunement is reflected in their consistent adoption of a *mediated* mode of reception, which in Yuan's case effectively interrupted any form of engagement with the narrative or discursive content of this episode. As is evident in the following remarks, Yuan highlighted various aspects of textual aesthetics, generic form and intentionality for often severe criticism:

> This would have to be the lowest quality.... To me there's no character in it, there's no story in it.... In other words, everything is expected beforehand.../.... You can almost predict what they're going to say, and then its not funny any more.../.... It's almost like saying a few sentences, and then they wait for you to laugh. In other words, they think beforehand that now the people are going to laugh. That's not funny. (Yuan)

Yuan's deeply felt sense of estrangement from this text as one in the genre of American sitcom appeared to be most immediately related to his ethnic and cultural identity as a Dutch immigrant. In the following extract, Yuan distances himself from the American and British peoples and their sense of humour by way of emphasising his own European heritage and the specific set of shared cultural knowledge and experience it provides access to:

> I think in the country where we come from, the humour is totally different from the American and British. The American humour I can understand, but I don't find it humour. The British, quite often I don't understand their humour, it's quite different, and there again I don't like it because I don't understand it.../... Now, in conflict to those two, if you come to the Western European ones, apart from Britain - Germany, Holland, Belgium, not France - their humour is [spontaneous], it springs up out of nowhere, all of a sudden, even the Italians'[humour] too. If you get the Dutch or the Belgium, or the two against each other, there's history there, you know it, you've lived in it and you understand it. (Yuan)

This particular group membership evidently provided fertile conditions for Yuan's exclusive adoption of a mediated mode of reading, effectively precluding the possibility

of any level of engagement with the *content* of this episode, as the following interchange reveals:

> *Were there any parts in particular in this programme that stick in your mind, that you can remember?*
> No.
> *Nothing?*
> No, I was completely turned off.
> *When did you turn off?*
> Right from the start, when I knew what programme was coming on.
> .../...
> I only have to see that start, or see one face or know one programme. Off.
> *Off - not interested?*
> Yeah.
> *So if I asked you a question such as 'was this programme trying to tell you anything?' then/*
> I would say no, nothing at all.
> *What do you think then was the purpose of the programme being made? What do you think the makers were trying to do?*
> All I can think of is money. In other words, they make the money on these programmes in the countries where they were made, and then sell them to countries that haven't seen them yet, so they're making double money, or triple money. (Yuan)

Importantly, it must be stressed that Yuan was not, strictly speaking, *unable* to engage with this text. Rather, he actively refused to do so upon realising that the programme he was being asked to watch was an American sitcom, and more specifically, *Murphy Brown*. For this participant, the opening credits of *Murphy Brown* signified the beginning of a programme of such poor quality and predictable humour that it could not be tolerated. What makes Yuan's response even more significant, however, is the fact that it could potentially have taken a very different form, given his particular array of social group memberships. A devout Roman Catholic, Yuan has a long history of involvement in pro-life organisations and was initially contacted through his membership of a local group in which traditional family values are actively affirmed. As detailed in the following chapter, other participants with similar group memberships drew primarily from their religious and moral beliefs in adopting rhetorical modes of reception in their encounter with this episode. Yet because the methodology used in this study was that of individual interviews, Yuan's very different reading was able to emerge without being marginalised, as it undoubtedly would have been had a group

interview methodology been used. Clearly, this example reinforces the need to avoid categorising research participants according to their membership of any particular social, demographic or interest group(s) beyond the initial selection process.

For Marjory, estrangement from the form of this American sitcom text appeared to be most immediately related to her socioeconomic class membership. As a senior librarian, Marjory receives a substantial salary and also possesses some tertiary education, and can therefore be considered middle-class according to traditional sociological criteria. In her case, estrangement from the form of this American sitcom text seemed somewhat less pervasive than that evidently experienced by Yuan. That is to say, Marjory *did* engage with the narrative content and message of *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* at some level. Her response to that content was, however, almost always framed in terms of a mediated mode of reception. Marjory's comments thus reveal a marked critical distance from this episode, as illustrated in the following extract:

> *Were there any points of view that you felt weren't actually represented in this programme?*
> Look, the whole thing's such drivel that (laughs) I don't really think it matters, frankly (laughs).
> *So do you think that there's no point/*
> Well I wouldn't take it seriously enough, because I think it's about twelve- to fourteen-year old drivel, it's not for adults. I mean it's insulting to think adults are prepared to watch that kind of stuff. If they've had any education at all.
> .../...
> *Were there any characters in this programme at all that you could identify with?*
> No! I thought the whole thing was a load of crap! (laughs). I mean I have seen good American films (laughs)/
> *But this wasn't one of them. Can you tell me why it is that you think it's crap?*
> It doesn't say anything worth saying except in that one little bit, and frankly I think it's a complete waste of time, I wouldn't waste my time watching stuff like that, I've got better things to do. It doesn't do anything, it doesn't teach you anything, there's no real rounded characters in it, it's not portraying anything important about American society, it's just supposed to be making people laugh, and it's not even successful at that. (Marjory)

The centrality of Marjory's membership of the educated middle-class to her reception of this episode is also evident in following remarks, in which she suggests that regular viewers of this programme would most likely be unintelligent and poorly educated:

> *What sort of people would be likely to watch this show, do you think?*
> People who leave the TV on regardless, or who don't read, or who have nothing better to do, and not very intelligent at that.../.... I have met Americans, highly-educated ones, who live on a different planet from the sort of Americans who like these sitcoms. And they're in a minority of course. (Marjory)

Here, Marjory alludes to a class-based commonality that transcends national and cultural boundaries, linking her with an elite group of highly-educated Americans. Like her, these middle-class Americans are 'worlds apart' from the sort of (presumably working-class) people who watch sitcoms. Thus, in the process of distancing herself from this programme and its fans, Marjory implicitly articulates her middle-class identity and constructs herself as a well-educated, discriminating viewer, in opposition to regular viewers of this series.

Presumably, John would count *himself* among the educated middle-class Americans with whom Marjory apparently feels some affinity. A tertiary-educated American immigrant, John's reception of this episode seemed to reflect an element of 'cultural cringe' - a marked sense of personal estrangement from the cultural output of his nation of origin. Significantly, this estrangement from American sitcom as a cultural form was articulated in very similar terms to those used by Marjory and Yuan:

> It's a common thing with American humour, they assume the American audience has no brains so they have to point everything out, to make sure that people understand what the humour is. That's why so many people I know back there enjoy British programmes. (John)

However, while the adoption of a mediated mode of reception at times interrupted viewers' engagement with the narrative and discursive content of this episode (as in the case of Yuan), I would emphasise that lack of *receptivity* must not be conflated with viewers' discursively-grounded *opposition* to such content. Indeed, while Marjory and John primarily adopted a mediated mode of reception during their encounter with this American sitcom text, they offered preferred evaluations of its explicit affirmation of single-parent families, as is evident in the following remarks:

> The only time the thing became serious was when she was on the box and she did talk some sense, yes. I mean you've got to allow for all sorts of things. (Marjory)

Just to finish off, what was the most important issue that this programme dealt with, in your view?
Families are more than just mum dad and kids, there's other family make ups. They're not to be put down just because they're different.
Is that an important issue for you?
Not just on families, but on lots of things. Just because it's different, why put it down. It takes all different ways.... Who's to say which one is more valid than another? (John)

Only In America?

> For many New Zealanders...American television programmes (like *Alf*) remain forever foreign or 'Alien life forms'; what we are not, and what we do not resemble, representations of what we do not wish to become.... Some of the territory they inhabit does seem familiar (the nuclear family beloved of sitcoms), but the settings...are thoroughly foreign, as are the ways of saying and doing. (Lealand, 1988, p. 42)

Commentators in this country have argued that American television programmes present an image of America and Americans that is both "attractive and repellent" to many New Zealand viewers (Ibid., p. 51). Phillipa Straver goes so far as to suggest that there are voyeuristic aspects to New Zealanders' viewing of American television, and furthermore that our enjoyment of the 'Otherness' of American programmes facilitates the process of identity construction for many New Zealanders along the lines of "we may not know what we are, but at least we're not that" (Straver, cited in Conway, 1996, p. C1). The overriding impression conveyed by this sort of commentary is that New Zealanders' viewing of American television programmes is an experience typically marked by a sense of estrangement from people and places that are perceived as fundamentally and irreconcilably *different* from ourselves and from our own physical location, and hence that viewers in this country are both 'turned off' by and drawn to the difference that is represented by all things American.

I want to suggest, however, that the above position tends to over-emphasise the extent to which American programming is perceived as foreign by New Zealand audiences, largely at the expense of giving due attention to those aspects within them which New Zealanders recognise as familiar or universal terrain. Indeed, American sitcom is one genre in which such resonance is often recognised, as Lealand suggests above; but it seems logical to conclude that some degree of familiarity would also be perceived in

genres such as drama. After all, if American programming is really regarded as 'alien' by New Zealand viewers - a term which strongly implies a relationship marked by psychological *distance* - on what basis are these viewers able to *identify* with the characters, issues and events depicted in the constant flow of American television programmes broadcast in this country? On what basis are they able to *engage* with the narratives told by them, hour after hour, week after week, year after year?

The responses of the participants in this study suggest that their experience of viewing this American sitcom was marked, to varying degrees, by identification and estrangement, and that these perceptions often occurred simultaneously at different levels. It was evident, in the first instance, that differences in cultural and national location were at times transcended by viewers who perceived this American television programme as depicting common human experiences with which they were themselves familiar, often through one or other of their own social group memberships. For instance, many of the parents in this study alluded to some degree of familiarity with Murphy's struggle in coping with the demands of new motherhood. Maeve, for example, expressed the view that the textual depiction of new motherhood as a difficult and often frustrating experience was not a culturally specific representation of how things are for new mothers in America, but rather a depiction of the nature of that experience for particular women, regardless of their nationality:

> I think that the problems that Murphy had really cross all boundaries, not just the fact that she was an affluent, white, educated...mature American woman, I think lots of women would probably experience all the problems that she had, in some different degree perhaps. (Maeve)

Several other participants regarded the issue of solo parenthood as one which was of relevance in New Zealand today, as it clearly is in the United States. Robyn, for example, refuted the suggestion that this programme is made for an American audience by asserted the universality of its primary theme:

> I don't think it was made for an American audience, particularly, apart from the presidency and stuff like that, but for everyone I suppose. A lot of New Zealanders can relate to it *because we have a lot of solo parents.* (Robyn; emphasis added)

A sense of familiarity with the issues and debates depicted in this text was also evident in the responses of Elizabeth, herself a solo mother, and Barbara, both of whom fill in the 'gaps' generated by their different cultural location to that of this episode's

production by drawing on their own cultural knowledge and experience of how issues around solo motherhood are debated here in New Zealand. They consequently make sense of Dan Quayle's attack on *Murphy Brown* by referring to the on-going controversy surrounding the issue of welfare dependency among single mothers in *this* country:

> *How do you feel about the things that [Quayle] said about Murphy?*
> He's labelling her and because everybody knows that in New Zealand there are the young girls that decide to have a baby a year to different fathers...so all solo mums are going to be labelled as being this silly little girl who thinks getting X amount on the DPB is going to make her rich, and so he's just using her as a scapegoat for...whatever is going on in the country at the time. (Elizabeth)

> *Did you think this programme poked fun at any particular point of view at all?*
> [The view] that some young mothers have it easy, that's what they say here. 'Oh, they just sit on their bums and when their kids get older they go and get pregnant again', and I have been sucked into that mentality because I hadn't been a solo mum. (Barbara)

Examples such as these reveal the extent to which certain aspects of the version of reality depicted in this episode were perceived as echoing features of participants' own cultural and social location. Clearly, the viewing experience of Elizabeth and Barbara was marked by a sense of *familiarity* with the subject matter or content of *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato*, a familiarity which at this moment transcends cultural difference. It is also evident from the above extracts that viewers in this country are able to draw on the pool of historical, cultural, political, economic, social and discursive knowledge and experience available to them as New Zealand citizens, and to actively and creatively apply these in making sense of television programmes produced in 'foreign lands'. Given that the vast majority of television programming screened in New Zealand is produced within cultural contexts that differ from our own, this ability to 'fill in the gaps' with 'local' knowledge and experience seems likely to be a well-practised skill among New Zealand viewers.

More importantly perhaps, by 'referencing' unfamiliar cultural references in American television programmes with their own knowledge and experience as insiders within a different national and cultural context, New Zealand viewers can be understood as *indigenising* those programmes, giving them a local accent which interrupts any 'homogenising' potential they might be seen to possess. Reading foreign texts through the vector of their own cultural location, New Zealand viewers draw on a myriad of

extra-textual elements which shift the signifying potential of American programmes in unpredictable ways and permit the creation of new, more locally-relevant readings of them, as the above extracts illustrate. In this way, a not always familiar American politician's critique of Hollywood and its undermining of traditional social and moral values can be re-read as an all too familiar attack on solo mothers on the DPB here in New Zealand. While the text itself clearly reconfigures Quayle's remarks as an attack on Murphy as a solo mother, the issue of welfare dependency is never raised in this episode and its introduction by several of the participants in this study clearly constitutes an act of "bringing meaning back home" (Wilson, 1996, p. 6).

While many participants alluded to some degree of commonality between the depiction of America and Americans in this programme and their own experience and knowledge of New Zealand and New Zealanders, others foregrounded cultural *differences* and in some cases expressed a sense of estrangement from that depiction. In the responses of some participants, it is possible to witness a strong drive to distance themselves from the 'Americanness' represented by this episode. As noted above, this was especially evident in the case of Yuan, whose reception of *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* was clearly interrupted by what Wilson (1996) describes as a 'wall' of cultural differences, some of which appeared to be related to Yuan's European heritage. In the extract below, Yuan describes the exaggerated nature of American humour as characteristic of the American public as a homogeneous group, clearly articulating his sense of cultural estrangement from all things American in the process:

> *If you were going to describe the American humour, how would you describe it?* Over-done. Yes, like the Americans are.../.... We find it everywhere, even if you go on travels, and the Americans are loud mouthed...you hear them in the distance, they show you a lot of money, you know, they think that they get everything for the money, and that's the same in their humour, everybody's got to hear it. They think it is funny and they forget that there are a lot of people who don't think it is funny.../.... I can't find another word other than...over-done, because that's what the people are, they're over-done, it's ingrained in them. (Yuan)

Perceived cultural differences also appeared to mitigate against an identification with the star of this series, Murphy, in a small number of cases. In the extract below, Kimi attempts to articulate why she dislikes Murphy so intensely, and in the process draws on very similar phraseology to that identified above as part of a shared cultural understanding of American sitcoms as 'obvious', 'unrealistic' and 'exaggerated':

Tell me about Murphy. What sort of person is she?

Attention seeking. I don't like her, aye, I don't.... All that stuff at the end was really neat and all the rest of it but it was all so *obvious*.... I don't like her character....because *she cracks jokes that are really obvious and aren't really funny*.... I just thought it was a little bit *exaggerated* when there are people that are really really stressed with their kids.... I suppose it's a comedy but she *made it a little bit light*, I think. I mean she was getting stressed out, but in a *ridiculous* way, you know.

You said before that you don't feel particularly good towards her. Can you tell me a bit more about that?

....I'm not saying that Murphy Brown wasn't caring, I just thought she totally *overdid*...the way she was with her child, you know. I just don't like her.... It is just a personality thing. Just *the jokes she tells*...she just doesn't appeal to me, yeah. (Kimi; emphasis added)

That Kimi's comments resonate very strongly with remarks made by other participants regarding the generic form of this episode is hardly coincidental, and suggests that her negative response to the character of Murphy Brown is being influenced by her cultural location and the access this provides to a critique of certain characteristic features of this series as a American sitcom, which Kimi transposes onto the figure of Murphy in her reading. Already predisposed to respond negatively to Murphy via her critical perception of texts of this genre, Kimi's adverse reaction is further compounded by a sense of estrangement from Murphy's behaviour toward her child, which she constructs as a feature of *cultural difference* in the extract below:

Do you think that new mothers in New Zealand are likely to experience the same sort of problems that Murphy had in getting used to it?

No, not at all. I just don't think that mothers in New Zealand have...well, I suppose there's mothers that aren't maternal but not to that extent, no, I didn't relate to that and I don't think many New Zealand mothers would. I suppose the odd percentage who are like Murphy Brown, very career-oriented, would. I can't speak for New Zealand mothers in general, but no, I don't think much of it was relevant for us. Some of the [other] things were there, like being a single mum...and going back to work, but not the total lack of knowledge about children. (Kimi)

Because of this 'lack of fit' between the reality depicted on screen and Kimi's own observations of the behaviour of mothers in New Zealand, Murphy's problems come to be attributed to her cultural identity as an American citizen, and are consequently

rejected as culturally *alien* - as 'not of this place'. Perceiving nothing that is familiar in Murphy's antics and having encountered nothing similar in the course of her everyday experience, identification is for Kimi tightly constrained by a wall of perceived 'cultural' differences.

For most of the participants in this study, however, recognition of differences between the American cultural context depicted in *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* and their own experience and knowledge of life in New Zealand did not appear to seriously interrupt an engagement with this text. The world according to *Murphy Brown* was not, in other words, a version of reality entirely apart from their own embodied existence; nor was it unrecognisable in terms of their own cultural experience. Furthermore, participants' assertions of cultural familiarity and estrangement often occurred simultaneously. Generally, familiarity was perceived in relation to basic social and moral values, and to what Alison described as "family, social organisation and those basic type of institutions". Estrangement, on the other hand, was identified in relation to specific textual references to the wider political context of production; for example to American public figures such as Dan Quayle and Bella Abzug. In the following extract, for instance, Elizabeth highlights her lack of familiarity with some of the 'jargon' and references to American figures and events contained in this episode, while simultaneously asserting a familiarity with its narrative *content*:

> I don't understand and I didn't pick up some of it because it's their jargon and what's happened in their country. [But] I can't help but think that...what happened in it - *even though it was very American*, [and] at one stage there when they were yelling at one another in the workplace I thought 'oh, this is just typical American, it turns me right off' - *but what the whole thing was about,* I think it could apply to America, to England, to New Zealand. *I suppose it could apply anywhere.* (Elizabeth; emphasis added)

Here, Elizabeth reveals a marked attunement to what she regards as cultural differences in forms of self-expression and social interaction, apparently viewing 'yelling' at people as a 'typically American', and indeed unattractive, personality trait. At the same time, however, she draws attention to commonality at the thematic level of "what the whole thing was about", in this way suggesting that issues around single motherhood and the family are in many respects universal. Thus, this narrative is *not* perceived as a specifically American one, even though the form of its articulation undoubtedly bears traces of this episode's cultural location. For Elizabeth, and indeed for most of the participants in this study, *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* tells a familiar story, but does so in a distinctly *foreign* accent.

Quayle Vs. Brown: Making Sense Of American Politics

It is evident from the above discussion that many of the participants in this study experienced moments of cultural estrangement during the course of their encounter with this American sitcom episode, particularly in relation to specific textual references to the political context of its production in the United States in 1992. Clearly, a 'preferred' reading of these references required a certain degree of 'insider' knowledge about this wider political context, a fact which immediately raises a number of questions, such as what happened when viewers did not possess that knowledge due to their being positioned within a *different* geo-political location to that of textual production? What did viewers located in *this* 'elsewhere' - in the different physical, national and cultural space that is contemporary New Zealand - 'do' with the absences or gaps generated by the many references to American political figures, issues and events that pervade this episode? What did viewers in this country make of the discursive position upheld by this text, given that it is defined through reference to political figures such as Dan Quayle, with whom New Zealanders may or may not be familiar?

Wilson (1996) suggests that when cultural texts are 'read' in contexts that differ from that of their production, viewers may attempt to fill in the ensuing gaps in textual semiosis by drawing on their own cultural knowledge and experience, thereby making sense of 'indeterminant' images and events in relation to their own geo-political location. The findings of this study indicate, however, that both this and a number of other modes of reception were available to cross-cultural viewers in the course of sense production.

Perhaps the most obvious site to which such viewers may turn in attempting to fill any gaps in their understanding of culturally-specific textual references is *the text itself.* Such references are, after all, made within the immediate textual context of dialogue, characterisation, narrative exposition and action, all of which may provide 'clues' to the possible significance of indeterminant moments. Indeed, when asked 'who is Dan Quayle?' and 'what sort of person is he, do you think?' a number of participants assumed a *transparent* mode of reception and consequently relied on various pieces of *textual* evidence to (often somewhat hesitantly) piece together Quayle's political identity, as illustrated in the following extracts:

> [Dan Quayle] was the vice president - *on the programme.* Is he really the vice president? (Robyn; emphasis added)

What sort of person is he, do you think?
Big-mouth.
Really? Why is that?
Oh, just trying to stir up trouble and that when it wasn't needed. *When someone was just trying to get on with her life with a brand new son.* (Greg; emphasis added)

Do you know what sort of person [Quayle] is at all?
No I don't, I have no idea.... *[T]aking as much as I could from the things he said,* I would say he is very conservative. He believes that...the family consists of parents and children and...the downfall of society can be somehow connected to difference in the family. (Alison; emphasis added)

Clearly, these participants did not have access to an 'insider's' knowledge of the wider American political context of this episode's production. Instead, they pieced together various clues gleaned from Quayle's depiction *within the episode itself,* during the course of which it is stated on several occasions that he is the American vice president. Quayle's comments, 'reported' within this episode during an evening news broadcast, are similarly *shown* to 'stir up trouble' for Murphy at a time when she is already struggling to cope with the demands of new motherhood. Examples such as these offer clear evidence of the power of media texts to frame viewer interpretations, a power which may be more pronounced in the case of cross-cultural reception due to the lack of 'extra-textual' knowledge with which to contest the representations and agendas on offer. As a consequence, some cross-cultural viewers may be more reliant on information supplied within the programme itself, which is then 'read' largely on its own terms.

Obviously, the utilisation of textual 'clues' as reference points in the process of sense production has implications for the actual meaning that will be made of 'foreign' television programmes, and it seems fair to assume that this particular mode of reception would most likely facilitate the production of a preferred evaluation of this episode's presentation of Quayle and his politics. Having said that, viewers are always able to commute between different modes of reception and hence it should not be presumed that those who utilise textual clues in this way will inevitably 'absorb' the preferred textual meaning 'injected' into to them, as implied by the hypodermic needle theory of media effects. Jill, for example, initially draws on the single textual clue that Quayle is the American vice president, but then proceeds to make inferences about him as a person which clearly *exceed* the limited frames of reference provided by the text itself, reflecting her movement to a *referential* mode of reception at this moment:

Can you tell me who Dan Quayle is?
Wasn't he the vice president? They said on the television programme he was the vice president of the USA.
And what sort of person is he, do you think?
Well, I don't know anything about him and I haven't really stopped to think about him, but I guess because he's the vice president of the United States of America, he must be a person that's very successful. He must be a strong person, presumably.... Yes, so he's obviously a person who's got a certain amount of leadership skills and people skills and those sorts of things. (Jill)

In the absence of additional insight into the wider political context of this episode's production, Jill draws on her pre-existing and relatively favourable understanding of high-ranking politicians as typically 'successful', 'strong' and possessing good leadership and people skills in a way which effectively resists and undermines the negative representation of Quayle within the text itself. This reading is particularly interesting given that this episode goes to considerable effort to convey the impression that Dan Quayle is actually quite inept, a point addressed in greater detail below.

Other participants evidently gleaned referential insight from their knowledge and experience of the wider social, political, cultural, and national context of textual production, which in several cases was sufficiently detailed to overcome some of gaps in textual semiosis generated in the shift between two distinct cultural locations. Andrew, for example, evidently had no extra-textual knowledge of Dan Quayle or his political identity, but compensates for this lack by actively 'filling in the gaps' and drawing on his understanding of 'the way things are' in America today from his position as a cultural 'outsider':

What sort of person do you think Dan Quayle is?
Well, I don't really follow American politics very much, but from what I have seen of the programme, I think he has got to be a multi-millionaire to even think of running over there for Parliament anyway. So he has obviously come from a well-to-do family, probably went through Harvard or one of the other big Unis, he's from a family that's been able to offer him everything in life that he's needed or wanted, monetary-wise anyway. This is my perception of it, he's achieved what's known as 'the American dream'...seems like he has...got a good wife, the family, the children in the traditional sense. He seems to be happy in the career that he's chosen. (Andrew)

In this account, Andrew accesses his existing understanding of America as a place in which money and a Harvard degree are necessary passports to political participation, and where the American dream is material wealth, a happy family and a successful career. Unfamiliar with Quayle's political reputation in the United States, Andrew uses what little contextual knowledge he does possess to paint a far rosier portrait of him than do the producers of this episode - again revealing that viewers' existing 'pool' of knowledge and experience may at times interrupt and work against the attempted 'closure' of textual semiosis. It is also interesting to note that in making this reading, Andrew does the reverse of the American participants in Philo's (1990) study of the British miner's strike - he re-signifies a specific feature of American reality 'Congress' - by supplementing it with the more familiar local equivalent, 'Parliament'

A small number of participants offered readings which drew on quite specific understandings of the wider political context of this episode's production in the United States. Marjory was one of several participants whose prior knowledge effectively *confirmed* the textual depiction of Quayle as something of an imbecile:

> *Who is Dan Quayle?*
> He was vice president under that other idiot - Reagan [Bush].
> *What sort of person is he, do you think?*
> Oh, Dan Quayle? A right-wing ignoramus! He's made the most outrageous statements on all sorts of things. A very dangerous character.
> *Dangerous how?*
> If he ever became president of the United States, let's hope he never does. (Marjory)

As Marjory's reference to Ronald Reagan reveals, however, such understandings were not always *factually* correct - Quayle was *George Bush's* vice president.

Somewhat differently, Sue draws on her extra-textual knowledge of the wider political context of production to effectively *counter* the negative textual depiction of Quayle in this episode. In the extract below, Sue clearly reveals some degree of insight into Quayle and his politics at the time of this episode's production in the United States in 1992, and attributes this to her much broader concern about moral issues. This concern is in turn related to her social group memberships as a Christian and pro-life activist:

> I know [Quayle] was a very moral person. He was a Christian, yeah.
> *What sort of things did he believe in?*

He believed in family values...and I think he had a very good family life himself, he was a good dad I think. He and his wife were very close.
You seem to know quite a lot about him/
Yeah I do/
Why is that?
I followed a little bit of...the last election with Al Gore and...I have some contacts in Hawaii who don't really like...Bill Clinton, he wanted to bring in abortion and homosexuality, and those are particular stands that I have quite strong views on and, yeah, I think where America leads then the rest of the world seems to follow, so I think it's very important for us to follow something of what's going on in the States, yeah. That's really why I sort of followed this situation, why I felt that Bill Clinton probably wasn't the best president for the United States.
So were you keeping an eye on the papers, or did you have those friends in Hawaii fill you in on what was happening, or/
No, I just got what news I could from the newspapers, from the TV, that was actually the information that I had. (Sue)

It is clear from the above examples that the process of cross-cultural reception can indeed be understood as an "interdiscursive encounter" (Moores, 1993, p. 46) between foreign television texts and local viewers, and furthermore that local viewers bring to that encounter their personal stock of pre-existing knowledges, experiences and discursive repertoires. The meanings these viewers make of non-local productions are thus to some extent idiosyncratic, since they are produced within the particular system of "contrasts, oppositions and differentiations" (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p. 77) which constitutes the micro-context of any given individual's reception. While this micro-context is obviously shaped by one's cultural location (aspects of which may be common to other 'cultural insiders') it remains simultaneously differentiated at the level of socioeconomic class, gender, age, political affiliation, religion and so forth, a point developed further in the following chapter.

For most participants, insight into the political context of textual production was largely derived from their more limited exposure to television and print media reports on American politics available here in New Zealand. Both John and Paul, however, were able to draw on 'first-hand' exposure to the wider political context of this episode's production, as both were actually in the United States at some point during Quayle's term of office:

Can you tell me who Dan Quayle is?
He was the vice president of the USA.
What sort of person is he, do you think?
Very intelligent, but he has had the habit of opening his mouth and putting his foot in it.
What sort of views does he hold, do you know?
Oh I'd have to search way back in my memory and even then I didn't pay that much attention. He was the vice president, and in a sense the vice president of the USA is a nobody, he's in the background. (John)

Dan Quayle was the vice president of the United States in [1993]. I think he's not currently in a high position. He seems to have made a number of blunders. I'm not quite sure, but it was sort of engaging the mouth before engaging the mind, but I would have thought a person in his position would have had a lot of his speeches written for him. So I'm rather surprised that he would make a gaffe like trying to shoot down Murphy Brown. (Paul)

However, only a relatively small number of participants possessed some prior knowledge of the wider political context of this episode's American production. While these viewers were able to use this knowledge to overcome some of the barriers produced by their different cultural location, others possessed no such knowledge. In one particular case, references to Dan Quayle and his criticisms of *Murphy Brown* appeared to hold no salience whatsoever. In the extract below, Melanie evidently misreads or screens out the considerable textual information identifying Quayle as both vice president and the source of the controversial remarks:

Can you tell me who Dan Quayle is?
He's the man that is her boss.
And what about...the man who said those things about Murphy on the television? Do you know who he is?
Wasn't he the main reporter, wasn't he? From that group. Oh, he was a news reader wasn't he?
You remember...when that guy Frank showed her how to hold the baby and then he sat down to watch the news and someone said something about/
Oh yes/
Murphy Brown. Do you know who that was? What his name is?
No I don't. I thought it was a news reader, wasn't it? On TV. (Melanie)

Clearly, a gap in textual semiosis persists for this viewer, one which could perhaps be more simply attributed to inattention on her part. Alternatively, this gap could be understood as a reflection of her location within a very different cultural context to that of this episode's production, since it is clear from the above extract that Melanie was mindful enough to register at least some of the relationships between characters in this series, and she certain *appeared* to be watching attentively at the time of the original viewing session. Furthermore, while Melanie evidently misunderstands who Dan Quayle is, and apparently has no insight into the significance of his representation within this episode, the indeterminancy of this textual moment does not detract from her reading of this programme as a "light-hearted tale about a solo mother and how she coped with motherhood and her job". Interestingly, what Melanie does do is *de-personalise* the comments made by Quayle, since he clearly means nothing to her. She thus generalises his criticisms to "the American people", who "had mixed feelings" about Murphy's status as a solo mother, and all of whom "had plenty to say about it". For these reasons, it is suggested that this gap in textual semiosis is not so much a product of viewer inattention as an example of the way in which some textual references may be so culturally-specific as to be literally incomprehensible.

Quayle's Commonwealth Club Speech

As discussed in chapter III, the vice president's criticisms of *Murphy Brown* and Hollywood's 'poverty of values' immediately fuelled considerable social, political and media debate in the United States. In a multitude of ways, *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* bears the traces of its status as a highly-politicised response by the producers of this series to Quayle's assertions. Cultural insiders, those 'in the know', and indeed anyone cognisant of the furore sparked by Quayle's May 19th Commonwealth Club speech, would likely recognise the fuller implications of this textual response. Given that this event was, however, a *national* controversy which warranted some international coverage but primarily held relevance for American citizens, it seems likely that much of this episode's political meaning would be lost in the shift between two distinct cultural and political contexts. This begs the question: what did the participants involved in this study make of Quayle's comments, given their relative *isolation* from the prolonged reaction these comments sparked in America, in turn a consequence of their positioning within this different geo-political location?

It is clear that being located here in New Zealand did indeed isolate most of the participants in this study from the well-publicised fallout generated by Quayle's remarks. While portions of the vice president's Commonwealth Club speech were 'reported' within the episode itself as part of an actual CNN evening news broadcast, the majority of participants were not aware that these comments had in fact been made

in real life, and hence presumed that this 'broadcast' was simply part of the (fictional) sitcom narrative. Courtney, for example, contests the accuracy of this textual representation on the grounds that it does not fit with her preconceived understanding of how politicians like Quayle would normally operate:

> *How do you feel about the things [Quayle] said about Murphy?*
> In real life, I doubt that would happen, because someone of his position is obviously not waiting to see a single mother have a baby who's in a professional position and then just candidly make reference to it in a news conference, I don't believe that would happen, I mean I believe that he would have had to have been provoked or, so as far as reality, well I doubt it, but more as a response to something rather than initiating discussion.../.... I don't believe he did [say those things]. (Courtney)

In the absence of an 'insider's' knowledge of the wider political context of this episode's American production, several participants perceived the whole Quayle incident to be a purely fictional event deliberately engineered by the producers of this text, a reading which reflects their adoption of a mediated mode of reading at this moment. Marjory, for example, put it this way:

> *How do you feel about the things that [Quayle] said about Murphy on this programme?*
> Oh, well I mean that's words put into his mouth, wasn't it/
> *In what way?*
> By the script-writers, surely. (Marjory)

Here, Marjory suggests that the producers of this episode have intentionally engineered Quayle's comments, presumably motivated by the need to construct another narrative complication. She then takes a somewhat different tack, and relates this incident to a recent political scandal here in New Zealand (in which M.P. John 'Hone' Carter cast various racial slurs live on talk-back radio) to raise the possibility that Quayle might have made those remarks after all:

> *Right, so do you think he really said those things, or was this just/*
> Oh well as far as I know I presume he didn't, but he was idiotic enough to say - well that's the sort of stupid thing that somebody in a high place might come out with and get a lot of bad publicity from, like that idiotic John Carter.
> *What did John Carter do? Oh John, yes the M.P., yes, 'Hone' - yes.*

> Well you know you've got to be careful what you say if you're going to end up in that sort of position. But they were having a dig at it, because I mean they made fun of Dan Quayle from the moment he got into that high office, everybody made fun of him because he was so busy making ridiculous statements all over the place. So I mean he was fair game. (Marjory)

Significantly, Marjory's (mis)reading of Quayle's remarks as purely *fictional* - as 'words put into his mouth' by the producers of *Murphy Brown* - effectively forecloses the possibility that she might respond to this text as 'serious political commentary', and offers some insight into the basis for her curt dismissal of this text as "a complete waste of time". The fact that Marjory herself juxtaposes this reading with a rather more favourable one of the American humorist Tom Lehrer suggests that had she been cognisant of the broader political ramifications of *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato,* her response might have taken a rather different form.[2]

Like Marjory, Elizabeth similarly emphasised the fictional, constructed nature of this episode before commuting to a referential mode and relating this textual depiction to her own cultural experience:

> *Do you think [Quayle] really said that, or was it just something that the programme makers made up?*
> She's not a real person...it's just a programme. [So I think] it's just the programme.
> *So you don't think he really said those things?*
> Well, this is just a TV programme, but I wouldn't be surprised if it's been said. I mean it's been said in New Zealand about the same sort of thing. (Elizabeth)

Here, both Elizabeth and Marjory can be seen to make sense of what is clearly an indeterminant textual moment by referring to recent issues, debates and controversies in New Zealand, in this way indigenising this 'foreign' text by re-reading it in light of the pool of 'local' knowledge and experience available to them as 'insiders' of this nation and culture.

Another participant adopted a rather different strategy, looking firstly for textual clues within the episode itself, and then to me, for resolution to this issue:

> *Do you think Dan Quayle really said those things about Murphy, or did the programme makers just make it all up?*
> I don't know. I was trying to look at one stage if he was actually saying it and in part of the programme I thought, is that really Dan Quayle? I was trying to figure it out because he's not actually known to me and I was thinking, what have they done? I was wondering if he actually said it, I was trying to watch his mouth move. Did he actually say it, did he?.../.... He did, so is that why they made that programme? Stupid man, no wonder. He was Republican, wasn't he, or something? He was really trying to oppress women back into the 50s. (Barbara)

Andrew similarly articulates the possibility that Quayle's comments have been engineered by the producers of this text, but then (unknowingly) identifies the actual tenor of Quayle's May 19th speech:

> I would say there has to be something. Actually it's quite interesting, at first I would say just straight off that it's something the programmers have made up, but then again, it may well have really been said when he was talking about the *programme* itself, not as a person called Murphy Brown. But he could have been mentioning the fact that, what sort of role model are we showing on TV? That a single mother, i.e. Murphy Brown, is unacceptable, so I am unsure. I was prepared to say 'yes, I think they were just making it up', but now I am not really too certain of it. (Andrew)

As the above extracts reveal, a good deal of uncertainty pervaded the responses of many of these participants. This uncertainty can, for the most part, be understood as a product of their being located within a distinctly *different* social, cultural and political context to that of textual production, and hence as attributable to their relative isolation from the extensive and well-publicised backlash to Quayle's original remarks. It is also clear that their readings are strongly informed by their expectations of this episode as one in the genre of *sitcom*. That is to say, in the absence of an 'insiders' knowledge of the wider political context of this episode's production, viewers in this country relied on their understanding of sitcom as a medium for *fictional* entertainment. Within this generic context, Quayle's remarks were interpreted as most likely made up by the script-writers, since "these things are stories", after all.

Despite their geo-political dislocation from this significant American event, a few participants did recall something of the (limited) New Zealand media coverage of the ensuing controversy in the United States, and one was actually in America at the time. Most interestingly, Irene draws a comparison between Quayle and a local politician,

Graham Lee, who now leads the Christian Democrats Party - again demonstrating this notion of 'bringing meaning back home' identified by Wilson (1996):

> I remember thinking God, [Quayle's] putting his foot in it again, and I thought he didn't do it - even for someone who is expressing a very right-footed point of view on a situation - he didn't do it very diplomatically or well and it aroused some reaction from both sides. You could imagine Graham Lee saying something like that, couldn't you, and people rising up on both sides of the fence and getting very uptight about it. (Irene)

Quayle And The 'Potatoe' Incident

Without wishing to overstate the importance of the literal last word of the text, the closing scene of *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* reiterates this programme's condemnation of Quayle as a political figure by depicting a delivery man dumping a truck load of potatoes outside his official residence. The effectiveness of this final 'potatoe' joke in securing this preferred assessment at the point of reception clearly relies, however, on a familiarity with the specific event to which it refers, as described here by Paul and John:

> *What did you make of the reference at the end to potatoe jokes, can you tell me what that was all about?*
> Yeah, Dan Quayle misspelt the word potato.
> *Do you remember when that happened? How you might have heard about it?*
> Yeah, it was all reported in the news media. They made a big deal of it - 'once again'! He was continually putting his foot in his mouth, one way or another, it's like he went out of his way to do it. (John)

> I was actually...posted overseas in America at that time.... In California and that's probably why I was more aware of what was going on and certainly you heard a lot more of the Dan Quayle spud jokes...going around than...if I was in New Zealand. Over there I didn't regularly get papers and these items on TV, I didn't follow it much. I don't know...what was happening with Dan Quayle or...what prompted him to give that speech. All I remember was the fallout from it and, as I say, his correction of a correct spelling of potato. (Paul)

For both these participants, being in America at the time of this event meant they were partially privy to an 'insider's' understanding of this culturally-specific textual reference. Most of the participants in this study, however, were not physically

proximate to the referent of this concluding joke and thus had no such insight into the wider contextual meaning of this final dig at the vice president. For many of these participants, this last reference to one of Quayle's many gaffs literally made no sense, and remained an indeterminant moment in textual semiosis, as this comment by Don suggests:

> I couldn't make out what the Dickens it was all about, why would they want to dump potatoes on Dan Quayle? I haven't a clue what they were doing that for. (Don)

In the case of Melanie, this meaningless textual reference appears to have been screened out all together: "I must have missed that". Clearly, then, being positioned within a different cultural context to that of textual production produced gaps in understanding that sometimes *remained* blurry or even blank patches in perception. At other times, however, this blurriness can be seen to have created spaces for divergent and often unpredictable meanings to be made of an otherwise indeterminant textual moment. This was indeed the case for Marjory and Maeve, both of whom read the 'potatoe' joke within the context of a different set of "contrasts, oppositions and differentiations" - not as a reference to Quayle's inability to spell 'potato' correctly, but as a reference to Murphy's first name, which is Irish in origin and also, coincidentally, Irish *slang* for potato. Both participants consequently interpreted this incident as a reference to Murphy's cultural heritage, which they presumed was *Irish:*

> *What did you make of the reference at the end to potato jokes?*
> Well, *Murphy*. Irish.../.... Well that's what I presumed.../.... I mean that's why he dumped them on Quayle, at least that's what I assumed was the idea. (Marjory)

In Maeve's case, this presumption generates an interesting example of the way in which participants are able to draw on their own ethnic identities (she is herself Irish) in the process of making sense out of what is, in this case, a somewhat ambiguous textual moment:

> Being Irish, I am sometimes offended by other cultures talking about the Paddy being a potato.... I mean it's okay coming from the Irish...we've been brought up that we can always laugh at our own jokes. I think they were trying to get it across that the potato, which seems to refer to the Irish as some person who is sort of dead and unintelligent and vague...whereas really the potato nourished the Irish families who didn't have any other food for a long time. And also it's very

> high in vitamin C. I've always been brought up to believe that if we have a potato in the house and an egg in the house, we've got a meal in the house. So I was a little bit iffy about the potato joke at the end, but I can understand, I mean to me it would have been more... *Murphy* - oh yeah! Okay, Murphy's an Irish name, perhaps I can see the irony in that, now that I've thought of it. (Maeve)

Other participants made similarly divergent (and often quite creative) readings of this 'blurry' patch in textual signification. Barbara and Irene, for example, drew on their existing knowledge of the way in which past American presidents have been caricatured to suggest that the 'potatoe' joke might have been a snide reference to Quayle's former occupation:

> Was he a potato farmer?
> *No, I don't think so.*
> Because you always got jokes about peanuts when it was Lyndon Johnson and somebody else, Carter, they must have been peanut farmers, working on farms or something. But no, I just know that we were laughing at him. With Quayle you'd think they'd be having bird jokes or something, not potatoes....maybe they don't know about Quail eggs or something. He must have done something silly to deserve that. (Barbara)

The fact that these viewers made, or attempted to make, personally-relevant meanings out of a clearly indeterminant textual moment reveals the extent to which cross-cultural reception is often a necessarily active and creative process, one which involves the selective mediation and transformation of textual elements which are at times unfamiliar in terms of the viewer's own knowledge and experience of the world.

Conclusion

As this discussion demonstrates, the encounter between *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* and the New Zealand participants in this study was shaped by two phenomena. The first was the often intense conflict between the aesthetic values implicit within this popular American television sitcom and those circulating within this different national context and vigorously upheld by some of those involved in this study. In certain cases, the clash between these two sets of aesthetic values prompted the adoption of a *mediated* mode of reception, at times interrupting viewers' engagement with the story and message content of this episode. In some instances, this counteracted the potential of such programming to play a significant role in discursive struggles around 'motherhood' and 'the family' in New Zealand today, since texts of this genre were

positioned as extraneous to the process of 'serious' debate and were subsequently dismissed as irrelevant 'trash'.

The second phenomenon related to participants' (often simultaneous) perception of familiarity and cultural difference in relation to the depicted reality of this American sitcom text. The findings of this study suggest that cultural and national differences were often transcended by those viewers who recognised familiar or universal elements in this foreign television production. Re-reading this American sitcom episode through the vector of their own cultural location, the New Zealand participants in this study drew on a myriad of extra-textual elements which shifted the signifying potential of this American production in unpredictable ways and permitted the creation of new, more locally-relevant readings of it. By doing so, these participants effectively ascribed *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* a role in the social construction of 'motherhood' and 'the family' in New Zealand today. That is to say, their acts of 'bringing meaning back home' imputed this episode with the *potential* to intervene in this debate, by way of repositioning it as a *locally relevant* voice in that ongoing process of discursive negotiation.

Somewhat less frequently, cultural differences were foregrounded by participants who perceived a distinct 'lack of fit' between the reality depicted in *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* and their own experience of life here in New Zealand. These participants expressed a sense of estrangement from this American sitcom episode which at times worked to interrupt viewer identification with Murphy Brown as its central narrative protagonist. For these participants, the role of this television production in the social construction of 'motherhood' and 'the family' in New Zealand today was constrained by a heightened perception of its depicted reality as culturally *alien* - as 'not of this place'. This raises the possibility that the privileged discursive position upheld by episodes such as this one might be ascribed the status of an unfamiliar voice speaking in a foreign accent, and subsequently rendered rather less relevant than local utterances to contemporary debates around 'motherhood' and 'the family' in this country.

More frequently, estrangement was identified in relation to numerous culturally-specific intertextual references to the wider political context of this episode's production in the United States in 1992. Encountering these references within this very different national and cultural context, the New Zealand participants in this study faced numerous gaps or absences in their perception and understanding, and employed a number of different strategies for sense production. Some participants adopted a *transparent* mode of reception and relied on information supplied within the text itself for possible 'clues' as to the significance of such 'indeterminant' moments, thereby

allowing the text to dictate the terms of its own interpretation. Such readings illustrate the power of television to frame audience understandings; a power which may be more pronounced in the case of cross-cultural reception due to the absence of relevant contextual knowledge with which to (in this case) contest the available evidence and the agenda governing this episode's presentation of the political controversy which erupted around Murphy's solo motherhood.

Other participants adopted modes of reception which enabled them to change the meaning of certain key textual elements. For example, in the absence of an 'insiders' knowledge of the wider political context of this episode's production, some local viewers relied on their understanding of television sitcom as a medium for *fictional* entertainment. Reading *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* on these quite different terms, these participants re-attributed Quayle's comments to the producers of this text, shifting their meaning quite significantly in the process. Still others tried to fill these blank and blurry patches by drawing on the pool of knowledge and experience they possessed as insiders of a different national and cultural context, thereby making sense of 'indeterminant' images and events in relation to their own geo-political location. Actively and creatively 'referencing' unfamiliar cultural references with their own knowledge and experience as insiders within a different national and cultural context, these participants effectively *indigenised* this American sitcom episode, giving it a local accent and permitting the creation of more locally-relevant readings of it.

In some cases, participants evidently gleaned additional insight from their knowledge and experience of the wider social, political, cultural, and national context of textual production in the United States, which in several cases was sufficiently detailed to overcome some of the semiotic gaps generated by this episode's shift between two distinct cultural locations. Finally, it is clear that for some of the participants in this study, being positioned within this different cultural context produced gaps in understanding that at times *remained* blurry or even blank patches in perception. Where gaps in textual semiosis persisted, viewers were sometimes found to simply overlook those elements which bore no salience for them. However, at other moments this blurriness in textual signification created fertile conditions for the production of divergent, unpredictable and often quite creative readings of key textual information.

Thus, the process of cross-cultural reception can indeed be understood as an 'interdiscursive encounter' between foreign television texts and local viewers. Furthermore, local viewers can be seen to bring to that encounter their personal stock of pre-existing knowledges, experiences and discursive repertoires. In the active and often creative process of making sense of unfamiliar and at times highly-specific

references to another place and space, viewers can be seen to 'make the global local', 'indigenising' foreign texts in ways which transform their meaning and made them relevant for their own national and cultural location. In the process, local viewers ascribe such texts varying degrees of significance in the social construction of 'motherhood' and 'the family' in New Zealand. That is to say, by reconstituting texts such as *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* as pertinent to this *different* cultural context, local viewers grant such texts a legitimate voice in social debates that are specific (yet not *exclusive*) to this time and place. At the same time, their local meanings continue to reflect the operation of a subtly *different* set of differentiations, oppositions and contrasts which may work to interrupt and undermine the attempts of 'foreign' producers to 'close' off the play of meaning and secure a preferred reading at the moment of a programme's (cross-cultural) reception.

Clearly, however, this 'new and different' context in which reception takes place is not monolithic, homogeneous nor static. While New Zealand citizens potentially share a common pool of historical, national, cultural, political, economic and social knowledge and experience of this geo-political location, this knowledge and experience is spread unevenly across different individuals and social groups. Furthermore, as Lealand (1994) points out, different cultures are not in themselves homogenous coherent groups, but rather, remain structured by socio-economic class, gender, ethnicity and generation. In terms of the theoretical understanding proposed here, each individual can be seen to exist within a more immediate *micro*-context of reception, at times differentiated and at other times united by their access to certain experiences, knowledges and beliefs and to particular discourses of the wider social world. Because of this difference 'between' as well as 'within' national audiences, both Ang (1991b) and Bell (1995) argue that researchers should attend to differences of geography and national identity as well as those of class, gender, ethnicity, politics, religion and so forth, since these continue to inform the way in which differently positioned members of television's 'global' audience experience and understand the world around them. These issues are addressed in chapter VII, which examines the relationship between modes of reception, cultural location, variables' such as gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, political affiliation and religious belief, and access to discourses of the wider social world. These issues are considered in relation to the discursive representation of 'motherhood', 'the family' and *Murphy Brown* in this American sitcom text.

VII

'Motherhood', 'The Family', and *Murphy Brown*

Introduction

Three key sites of meaning production are considered in this chapter. The first comprises participants' respective capacities to *identify* with Murphy as the central narrative protagonist of this American sitcom text. The second pertains to their receptions of this episode's depiction of Murphy as a mother and its discursive content around 'motherhood' more generally. The third addresses their responses to this episode's discursive affirmation of single parent families and other alternative family structures. Each of these aspects is considered in relation to the ability of *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* to 'set the agenda' for viewers' receptions and to define and delimit how these issues are conceived and talked about. But while the agenda-setting capacity of this American sitcom episode is acknowledged in this discussion, so too is the ability of viewers to read 'against the grain' and construct divergent receptions of this and other television texts. This potential is held to reflect the complex interaction between viewer identification, modes of reception, social group membership(s) and access to discourses of the wider social world. Understanding the nature and implications of that interaction is thus regarded as rudimentary to understanding the role of American entertainment television in the social construction of 'motherhood' and 'the family' in New Zealand today.

Identification Versus Estrangement

As discussed by Wilson (1996, p. 15), television programmes mark out "horizons of identification" for their potential viewers. In a character-driven narrative such as *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato*, the central narrative protagonist constitutes a key subject for viewer identification, and actually facilitates the activity of making sense of the text (Wilson, 1995). In the process of identifying with this protagonist, Wilson suggests viewers recognise that his or her beliefs, actions and/or life experiences resemble their own in some way. Based on the findings of this study, I would add that such perceptions of similarity are often grounded in viewers' accumulated social group membership(s) and the sets of beliefs, behaviours, and experiences these make available to differently positioned audience members.

The role of identification in the process of meaning production is also considered by Wilson, who suggests that in identifying with the central narrative protagonist, viewers simultaneously "involve themselves in [that] character's story, in [that programme's] related prescriptions for action (its moral or practical guidance), and persuasion of what is the case" (Wilson, 1996, p. 12). Identification is, in these terms, an important (although not *essential*) element in shaping viewers' acceptance of the discursive content of television programmes such as *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato.* Likewise, in the absence of viewer identification, viewers may be potentially more inclined to reject that content, since they are effectively estranged from the character whose role is that of facilitating and guiding the process of sense production.

Since it clearly impinges on the nature of the encounter between television texts and audience members, viewer identification is highly relevant to an examination of the social significance of television productions per se, and this episode more particularly. As argued in chapter III, Scene 2 of *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* heralds an emerging alignment of the narrative and discursive viewpoint with Murphy's *experience* of motherhood. These mechanisms work to position the viewer 'with' Murphy in this and subsequent scenes, in an apparent attempt to elicit sympathy for her predicament in caring for her new-born baby. On this basis, it was hypothesised that some female viewers might reject the discursive construction of Murphy's 'failure' within the feminine sphere as a product of her 'masculinisation', in favour of the preferred explanation that motherhood is hard work for the inexperienced. Such a reading would reflect their identification with Murphy's experience of motherhood as confusing, frustrating and at times overwhelming, on the basis of a perceived similarity between that textual depiction and their own personal and life experience.

Somewhat contrary to this original hypothesis, such sources of identification were *not* confined to female viewers, but rather were possessed by *parents* of both genders. For Barbara, Elizabeth, Greg, Jill, John, Julie, Maeve, and Matthew, identification with Murphy's plight was clearly grounded in their perception of having had similar experiences in caring for a young baby in their own parental roles, as suggested in the following remarks:

> Being a parent myself, I could identify with a lot of those...issues, babies not sleeping and that sort of thing. And wondering whether you're doing the right thing, or whether you're screwing up or whatever.... I could kind of identify with them, the frustration of having a baby that's not doing what it's supposed to be doing in terms of sleep and stuff.... I guess one of the things that I was

> doing...while I was watching it was relating it to my own experience of...being a parent. (Matthew)

> Not being able to relax with a child, not knowing how to breastfeed a child, you think you've got time to go and relax and have a nap and you can't, the child wakes up. Trying to get some time away from the child, but not being able to get into your old clothes, you have to wear dowdy-type of clothes until your body gets back to a shape. And I think its the feeling of just being tired and the fact that she...wasn't able to think as clearly, and that...she was just a slave to the child, yes.
> *Could you relate to that?*
> Yes, definitely! (laughs). (Maeve)

For these participants, differences in gender, socioeconomic class, political affiliation, religious belief and culture were to some extent transcended by their common recognition of the similarity between Murphy's depicted difficulties and their own experiences in trying to cope as new parents. Their subsequent ability to empathise with Murphy demonstrates that the commonality of human experience is at times able to surmount national and cultural boundaries and create 'globalised' television audiences. In the process of identifying with Murphy on the basis of their shared experience of caring for infants, very different individuals are, as Wark (1994) suggests, linked via television to other viewers in very different places.

Having said that, it is clear that these 'shared' parental experiences *were* simultaneously differentiated by gender. In the extract above, Maeve cites her own difficulties in breastfeeding, along with physical changes in her body and general tiredness following the birth of her children. Other elements of similarity grounded in the specifically *feminine* experience of childbearing (such as hormonal changes and post-natal depression) were recognised by the *mothers* involved in this study. Clearly, the source of identification for these women was that of the *embodied* experience of childbirth. This very potent source of recognition was not available to fathers, as Matthew acknowledges in this extract:

> One point that made me laugh was the boss of the news room saying that the show was his baby and she said something like, 'try telling me that after [you've had an episiotomy]'.... It made me laugh, it was kind of like, there are some things which I think as a male you're never going to share with a female.... Being overly empathetic is like a form of political correctness.... From my own view, you can go along as a partner and as a father and things to this childbirth

> experience, but it's not your body that's on the line. At the end of the day, there's only so much you can do in terms of rubbing [your partner's] back and getting glasses of water and mopping brow and all that sort of stuff. It's something you're kind of outside of, and you can't share in that labour. You've just sort of got to watch it. (Matthew)

For Matthew, empathetic identification with Murphy's problems was tempered by his wish to acknowledge the 'feminine specificity' of motherhood. As his response suggests, male and female parents appeared to identify with different aspects of Murphy's struggle as a new *mother* and an inexperienced *parent.*

Empathetic identifications were also made by Alison and Robyn, who, while not *themselves* parents, had observed first-hand the struggles encountered by friends in learning to cope with the demands of parenthood. In the following example, Alison draws on her observations of other individuals from within her life world sphere in a way which affirms the realism of the textual depiction of Murphy's difficulties:

> I've got heaps of friends with young babies and I've stayed with them and I've heard the baby wake at ungodly hours of the morning...six times in a night. I've seen the state that they've been in the next morning, just the physical and mental exhaustion, and yeah I can definitely relate to that. (Alison)

It is also evident, however, that neither parental nor immediate life-world experiences provided an *automatic* source of identification with Murphy in her struggle to cope with her new baby. A smaller number of parents did not identify with Murphy's struggle for various reasons. For Sue, a mother of two, this estrangement appeared to be grounded in a perceived 'lack of fit' between the textual depiction and her own experience of caring for young children:

> *Could you identify with Murphy at all?*
> No. That baby...cried and cried the whole time and...I felt it's ridiculous, a baby just doesn't cry the whole day.... I've not had a baby like that, I think some people have had babies like that but I don't think they're that common. (Sue)

Furthermore, it appears that Sue's consequent *inability* to identify with Murphy's difficulties in caring for her new-born child effectively facilitated her acceptance of the subordinated discursive construction of Murphy's 'failure' within the feminine sphere as a product of her 'masculinisation'. That is to say, Sue attributes Murphy's lack of maternal feeling to her excessive participation within the public realm:

> She and the other female on the show, were quite masculine.... Like the portrayal was she was living in a masculine world, she had to assume these masculine...traits.../... I think they've lost some of their femininity, yes.
> *Why is that, do you think? Why do you think they had lost some of their femininity?*
> I think because they had to portray that women can do as well in a male world. But they also portrayed that women had to become masculine, masculinised almost.../.... In a way, by having the baby, I wonder if she was trying to regain that femininity, prove that she was feminine again. (Sue)

Evidently, the 'privileged' reading of these initial scenes largely relied on the ability of viewers to identify with Murphy's difficulties in coping with motherhood, which in turn depended on their perception of similarity between her struggle and their own (lived or observed) experiences of parenthood. Where these depicted difficulties were inconsistent with participants' own personal and life-world experiences, they became effectively 'estranged' from Murphy as the central narrative protagonist. This in turn generated additional possibilities for viewers to 'read differently'. In Sue's case, this alternative reading was framed in terms of the textual suggestion that Murphy's problems are due to the essentially incompatible nature of rationality and femininity, a suggestion which is gradually overturned through an emerging textual alignment of the narrative viewpoint with Murphy's *experience* of motherhood. As an estranged viewer, Sue resists the preferred empathetic subject position and instead perceives Murphy as 'masculinised'.

Particular demographic and social group memberships also seemed to interrupt the process of viewer identification in a number of cases. Kimi's rejection of the preferred empathetic reading of Murphy's difficulties is explicitly linked by her to her occupation as a crèche supervisor and the fact that she lives with a young child herself. These factors are highlighted by Kimi as she attempts to explain her very negative perception of Murphy's (mis)handling of her infant:

> The way she held the baby...really stuck in my mind 'cause I work with children all day and we have a nine month old baby at home....and I just thought...ohhh, you know, that's shocking. Hold the baby properly. It was making me feel really uncomfortable....
> .../...
> *Why was that?*

> Because I've just never seen a mother hold a baby...out like that.... Not for that amount of time, walking around and saying "what do I do?".... I thought, hold the baby properly for God's sake, especially if it's a real baby. (Kimi)

Here, Kimi compares the depicted 'reality' of Murphy's struggle with her own life world knowledge of how professional people *like* Murphy 'really are', and finds a lack of fit which leads her to reject the version of events presented in this episode:

> I really don't believe people can be that professional and career-oriented that they can't even hold a baby properly.../.... [P]rofessional people that I have worked with are also very natural and...have a very caring way towards children. (Kimi)

As noted in the previous chapter, this lack of recognition leads Kimi to construct Murphy's problems as a product of her *cultural location*, thereby resisting the privileged textual attribution that motherhood *itself* can be confusing, frustrating and at times overwhelming, particularly for inexperienced mothers.

Somewhat differently, Irene alludes to generational differences in referring to her very dissimilar experience of motherhood, which evidently rendered her unable to identify with Murphy's problems coping with her young child:

> I found it a bit hard because I never found myself in the situation where I had a baby I didn't know what to do with, because I had been brought up so much with children that being a mother came fairly naturally, so I couldn't identify very much with that situation. (Irene)

As Irene notes, her own very different life-world experience attests to New Zealand's much higher fertility rate at the time of her own childhood in the 1920s:

> When we were young, there were always several children in the family and the older ones had to help with the younger ones, and of course there weren't all the facilities in the household either so you sort of learnt to handle children and babies quite young. Certainly I was the oldest in the family so I did a lot. I think nowadays of course they don't, do they, because it is very often only one or two children in the family. (Irene)

Socioeconomic class appeared to be a key factor in interrupting viewer identification for Don. While to some extent sympathetic to Murphy's difficulties on the basis of his own parental experiences, Don implicitly highlighted differences of socioeconomic

class as a barrier to identifying with Murphy as narrative protagonist on at least two occasions:

> *How do you feel about [Murphy]? Do you like her or dislike her?*
> I don't particularly like her, no.
> *Any particular reason?*
> This might sound odd, but I think she's got too much money.../.... When I say she's got too much money, money gives people scope to do all sorts of things. A person without money is restricted. She seemed to be quite unrestricted, with enough wherewithal to be quite independent. And to that extent out of touch with the ordinary things in life. (Don)

Here, Don voices his negative reaction to Murphy's depicted financial freedom, a freedom which he subsequently contrasts with the financial hardships he experienced during his own childhood, and later as a lowly-paid civil servant supporting a wife and four children. In the extract below, Don's heightened awareness of class differences between himself and Murphy, an apparently successful and wealthy television journalist, can be seen to have interrupted the process of viewer identification:

> *Could you identify with Murphy's problems at all, in terms of looking after the baby?*
> One of her major problems seemed to be that she was still trying to live in two worlds at one time.... Having a baby seemed to be one of those things that happen. A misfortune, rather than a fortune. A lady from Rototuna, she used to say to my wife, 'you're really rich, you've got all these children...you're wealthy'. We had nothing, comparatively. We had old bombs of cars and...we made do on very little. [T]here *she* was, she wasn't prepared. Quite unprepared. It's almost like Cleopatra, expecting to have somebody to look after her children. She was expecting to have a Mary Poppins. I suppose when I was a baby my aunt...became my Mary Poppins. But she didn't have resources either, like we moved out of the area where there was electricity. We were on to candles. We had to learn to make do, like old Kiwis do. Number eight wire. (Don)

In Courtney's case, strong religious beliefs and related social group memberships evidently worked to disrupt the process of viewer identification with Murphy. In the extract below, Courtney expresses her inability to identify with Murphy's difficulties, which she attributes to her own recent decision to become a full-time 'home executive' mother:

> I can't really say that her mothering role impresses me or was anything that I want to emulate. Primarily because she certainly didn't look very capable. She's obviously unable to show affection or didn't know basic things of affection and touch and care and security.
> *So, could you identify with her problems at all?*
> Her child was like an extra extension and her baby wasn't her main focus, her home was not her main focus. I mean I can't identify with that because I've just re-adjusted my life to make my home my new focus and then work from there. My home's now where I operate from, it's like my office as such. She's not made the home her focus, it was still the office that was her focus. Home was secondary. (Courtney)

Evidently, Courtney's very different experience of motherhood created an incongruity which undermined her ability to identify with Murphy in her very different situation. Courtney's experience should not, however, be regarded as entirely idiosyncratic, since it is clear from other remarks made during the course of our discussion that her decision to become a full-time mother is in turn linked to an idealised notion of domestic motherhood grounded in the discourse of the moral right. As a Pentecostal Christian and pro-life activist, Courtney was intimately familiar with this maternal ideal, which I suggest provides the underlying discursive basis for her rejection of Murphy's 'motherhood mode' as 'Other' (and indeed, inferior) to her own.

The above examples neatly illustrate the point made in chapter II, that while internal structures and processes might seek to place limits or constraints on the signifying potential of any text, authorial intention cannot guarantee that this preferred meaning will be the meaning decoded by any individual viewer. Even where the structure of a text might clearly privilege a certain discursive voice or viewer subject position, as it clearly does in the case of *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato*, viewers remain able to draw on alternative, subordinated and extra-textual discourses as interpretive frameworks for understanding actions and statements within the text itself, and may resist adopting the subject positions it prefers, thus heightening the opportunity for idiosyncratic and resistant readings.

It is also apparent that one aspect of Murphy's identity not related to her role as mother or parent provided an additional source of viewer identification for some of the participants in this study. Irene, Matthew and Maeve commonly cited Murphy's political perspective and 'activism' in responding to Quayle's assertions as sources of recognition. For Irene, this apparently resonated with her own life world experiences as a union activist and community worker: "I could identify with her getting up and

changing people's opinions, because I have spent a lot of my life trying to do that". Both Matthew and Maeve described themselves as "left-wing" and perceived Murphy's politics as an additional site of commonality and thus source of identification:

> I could identify with someone like Murphy Brown, some of I guess her political outlook. (Matthew)

> The fact that she's got very neat politics - obviously they're politics which I can identify with too. (Maeve)

The ability of these participants to recognise similarity and thus identify with Murphy on the basis of their own political beliefs illustrates the points made by Fitzgerald (1991), Wark (1994), Morley and Robbins (1995) and Wilson (1996) concerning the potential of television to facilitate the construction of political communities beyond national and cultural borders, as outlined in chapter V.

Talking About Motherhood and Murphy Brown

This section considers the relationship between viewers' ability to identify with Murphy, the various modes of reception adopted by them, and their responses to this episode's discursive content around motherhood and *Murphy Brown*. As argued in chapter III, the process of discursive articulation in *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* effectively works to privilege a particular set of meanings in relation to Murphy's new mothering role, including the idea that Murphy can *learn* how to be a mother. It was shown that this episode articulates for comedic purposes, but eventually refutes, the essentialist notion that women possess a biologically innate maternal instinct. In place of this notion, *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* privileges the liberal-humanist assumption that the nurturing of small children is an acquired social behaviour which men may exhibit also. This de-gendered notion of parenting is affirmed at various moments, perhaps none more potent than in Scene 7 when Frank effectively teaches Murphy how to 'mother'. The narrative resolution of this episode was also shown to privilege the idea that Murphy could successfully reconcile the demands of motherhood with her professional journalistic career, through its restoration of the initial equilibrium of this series. In the process, this text can be seen to implicitly affirm the ability of working mothers like Murphy to effectively juggle their responsibilities at home and at work.

The way in which differently positioned participants responded to this discursive content demonstrates the complex interaction between viewer identification, modes of reception, social group membership(s) and access to discourse. Participants drew on a range of textual and extra-textual interpretive resources in constructing their responses to this episode's depiction of Murphy as a new mother, including 'clues' provided within the text itself, their own experience and knowledge of parenthood, their understandings of television sitcom as a genre, and competing discourses of the social world. Their different approaches to the process of sense production shaped the actual receptions they made of this text in a myriad of ways, and generated the conditions for readings which variously affirmed and contested this episode's depiction of motherhood and *Murphy Brown*.

'Telling it Like it is...'

Approximately half of the participants in this study could be said to have implicitly or explicitly accepted most of this episode's privileged textual meanings relating to Murphy as a new mother, along with its discursive content concerning the nature of motherhood more generally. Such acceptance was, however, differently grounded contingent on the particular mode of reception adopted.

Several participants adopted a *transparent* mode of reception in accounting for Murphy's apparent difficulties coping with her baby, and thus effectively relied on the many available textual 'clues' supporting the explanation proffered by the episode itself - that motherhood is hard work for the inexperienced. In the following extract, for example, Elizabeth draws on the available 'evidence' of Murphy's age, lack of knowledge of early childcare and career orientation in constructing an explanation which is entirely consistent with that privileged by *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato*:

> *Why do you think Murphy has such a hard time coping with her baby?*
> She's obviously having a child later in life, and to have a baby and come home to a house [when you] don't know what you're doing, it's hard for anybody. On top of that...she's very good at her job and she wants to be there.... [S]he doesn't really know what she's doing.... As a social worker I could give her...information about what to do. About where to go for resources. (Elizabeth)

While Elizabeth clearly knows that this programme is fictional, she temporarily grants this fictional world the status of real life and relates to Murphy *as though* she were a real person encountering real dilemmas. Consistent with her adoption of a transparent mode of reading, Elizabeth slips between this fictional world and her own everyday reality. She thus activates her occupational identity as a social worker and responds to

the fictional Murphy's difficulties as though these were *real* problems encountered by one of her *own* clients. On this basis, she reflects on the nature of her (hypothetical) real-life professional intervention in such a situation, which would be to provide "information about what to do" to a new mother potentially at risk.

Paul adopts the same mode of reception in the following extract, in which he attributes Murphy's problems to her age, lack of sleep, and (inappropriately) clinical approach to caring for her child, all of which are features of the fictional life world of this sitcom:

> *Why do you think that Murphy has such a hard time coping with her baby?*
> Well, the first thing that springs to mind would be her age. Assuming she is mid-forties, she'd be very set in her way of dealing with life.... [S]he obviously has the nice apartment, she has been very successful and in control of everything. Suddenly it's her first night at home, [and] she has this item...which she cannot control. It is controlling her. She's short on sleep, which would tend to aggravate the situation. Her necessity to jot things down when Frank was explaining, 'oh, you put it to the chest and sway'...would indicate a very clinical or analytical way of approaching life, whereas with a child you can't do that. (Paul)

In terms of the model of reception presented in this thesis, these interpretations of the textual depiction of Murphy's difficulties as *symptomatic* of her personality or biography are understood as reflecting viewers' adoption of a transparent mode of reception.

When considering what sort of mother Murphy would make, a smaller number among this group of participants again drew from the text itself as their primary frame of reference. These participants effectively surmised that Murphy would make a good mother *because*, as the text itself demonstrates, she was learning 'on the job' and doing just fine by the episode's end:

> *What sort of mother do you think she'll make?*
> I think she'll be a good mother. She changed a lot during the programme, picked up little bits as she was going along, I think she'll be a fine mother. (Andrew)

> Well, in the end I suppose the kid'll train her quite well. With all the different ups and downs...she seemed to learn quite quickly, the different things once she was shown. (Greg)

More importantly, Greg and Andrew's adoption of a transparent mode of reception evidently facilitates their implicit acceptance of the discursive content of this episode, since the textual depiction of Murphy (on which they rely) is clearly framed in terms of, and indeed *confirms*, the liberal-humanist notion that maternal qualities are socially acquired rather than biologically innate.

Some participants commuted between transparent and *referential* modes of reception. Andrew, for example, initially speaks about Murphy *as though* she were a real person with her own life history. While the character of Murphy Brown does have a (purely fictional and very limited) history within the life world of this television sitcom, Andrew is not a regular viewer of this series and thus is not familiar with the 'personal background' that has accumulated over the course of many episodes and several seasons. Instead, he attempts to 'fill in the gaps' in order to construct a coherent explanation for Murphy's difficulties, and does so by inventing a past for her in which she had no siblings and few relatives:

> *Why do you think Murphy was having such a hard time coping with the baby?*
> I think she is an only child and probably her parents are dead as well. She hasn't got many relatives because she doesn't know how to look after kids. (Andrew)

At this moment, Andrew suspends disbelief and grants this text the status of real life and Murphy the status of a real human being - an orphaned only child with few relatives to familiarise her with the care of young children. He then shifts to a referential mode and contrasts this depicted reality with his own very different experience, before returning to a transparent mode and once again highlighting the available textual evidence of Murphy's lack of experiential knowledge of basic childcare:

> ...I am only twenty-two and I can look after a baby, feed it, change it, [but] she knows nothing and takes out manuals and writes down what she's been told, and tries to just implement it by the book. She's got all the so-called knowledge, but putting it into practice is another thing. (Andrew)

Other participants more consistently adopted a referential mode of reception in relation to these issues, and drew on their own stock of personal experiences and life-world observations of the problems faced by new mothers in constructing sense of Murphy's depicted struggle. As detailed in the previous section, some viewers recognised elements of similarity between the reality depicted on screen and their own experience of life, which was often linked to their being a member of a certain social group, such

as 'parent, 'mother' or 'left-wing political activist'. Such life experiences are simultaneously moulded by features of the macro-cultural context within which people live. Jill's interpretation of what this episode says about motherhood, for example, was very clearly grounded in her own experience as a mother, which was in turn shaped by her cultural location as a mother *in New Zealand during the early 1970s*. This experience provided ample evidence of the validity of this episode's message that, as she put it, "not all women are natural mothers. Not natural instinctive loving caring mothers who...know instinctively what to do with babies". In the following extract, Jill relates this textual message to her own unsuccessful attempt at breastfeeding her third child, in the process making numerous references to pertinent features of the macro context of reception detailed in chapter IV. Of particular note is her reference to the rise of child-centred discourse in New Zealand and its affirmation of breastfeeding as essential in order to give children the 'best possible' start in life:

> In my day...you just assumed that...it was natural for women to nurture and care for their babies and [that] you didn't have difficulties in the terms of what to do with them and how to bath them and how to hold them.... An instance that I had, was that it was natural for women to be able to [breast]feed their children.... When I had my third child I was told that if you wanted to feed the baby you could, and the fact that I hadn't been able to feed my first two children...was all in my mind - it was my mind that stopped the production of milk. Because it was natural for women to feed their children, you see.
>
> *Who was it who said these things to you, that it was all in your mind that you couldn't feed your babies?*
>
> Well it was a particular friend of mine who was a nurse and who belonged to the La Leche League...they are into breastfeeding and twenty-five years ago...it was just beginning to become the big thing, *that you should always breastfeed your children because it gives them [that] vital start to their life*, you see.... [W]hen she said that I thought, 'well, I'm just not going to let it be that I haven't fed my child simply because I didn't want to'. And by the time he arrived I really, really wanted to [breast]feed him. To be able to do it myself. And...by the tenth day of sitting around the hospital I was just beginning to produce the milk. Of course, as soon as I got home and had two other children to run round after as well as the new [baby] - I mean in hospital they're doing all the...washing and the ironing, and all you did was sit and relax. But as soon as I got home and got back to the [domestic] lifestyle, whatever milk I had just went.... So that was when I discovered that in actual fact I just didn't have it. And it didn't matter how much I wanted to, it just wasn't there and you had to accept that. And that happens with

> people. We're all different and not everything is natural to everybody. (Jill; emphasis added)

In the case of Melanie, whose personal experience of motherhood was very different to that depicted in this programme, occupational group membership appears to have provided an alternative source of referential information; one which also effectively confirms the accuracy and believability of Murphy's struggle. In the following extract, Melanie draws on her many years of experience as a voluntary social worker, and consequently relates Murphy's difficulties to the very similar problems she had seen encountered by other inexperienced mothers:

> All of sudden she was left [alone] with a baby and that's what happens sometimes if you've never had a baby before...that's the frightening time.../.... I have seen heaps of women do that. I have known new mothers who didn't know which end of the baby was which. They'd never held a baby and that's true. They didn't know. They soon found out of course.... I've seen them feed a baby with a bottle the way you'd feed a pet lamb. That's true. They didn't know how to hold a baby to feed it. Let alone breastfeed. (Melanie)

Somewhat differently, Maeve draws on her experience and historical knowledge of New Zealand society in the course of making sense of Murphy's problems. She refers to both mainstream assumptions about motherhood and pre-industrial modes of family organisation in suggesting that Murphy's difficulties are due her social isolation (in turn a by-product of the shift to a nuclear family structure), and a problematic social expectation that women have an innate maternal instinct:

> *Why do you think Murphy had such a hard time coping with her baby?*
> I think it's our society which thinks that if...women go and have children, then we're expected to cope [but] I really think that in say, pre-industrial times...there was always the whanau, there was always the family there, and you had maybe an older sister or an Aunt or someone who could help to give you...some relief and perhaps hold the child for a while. And I think it's just simply that society expects women to have children and be able to cope and know how to do all the right things, and it's not like that at all.... I suppose for some women it does become natural, but not always. (Maeve)

It is significant that Maeve uses a concept quite specific to this cultural context - the Maori word 'whanau' (meaning extended family) - since it indicates her perception of a fundamental commonality between America and New Zealand as Western capitalist

nations. Once again, this illustrates the ability of local viewers to de-emphasise cultural differences and effectively 'indigenise' American television productions.

In contrast to this referential mode, the receptions of other participants within this group addressed the discursive content of this "text as message" more directly. Some adopted an *analytical rhetorical* mode and considered the nature of that message itself and its possible implications for the wider community or society, as exemplified in these remarks made by Alison, a law student in her early twenties:

> I was quite struck by the fact that, to a certain extent, I felt that whole programme reinforced again what I think is an outdated attitude - that if you are to have a career, somehow it is not complementary with being a mother, ...which I find quite strange. I think there is still that stereotype, like career women, they're sort of self-centred, they are after money and self-gain, versus women who are mothers, the nurturer type thing.
> *Do you think it reinforced that idea, or is it critiquing it, or what do you think?*
> Well at first I thought that it was reinforcing it and...it goes against what I thought Murphy Brown, the character, portrayed. But at the end I think that by the sort of humour that she brought into it, she was saying 'take another look at that' and I think it was a critique. But I don't know whether that would have been clear to other people, I think you could have got mixed messages from it. (Alison)

Here, Alison identifies a particular message which is indeed present (although subordinated) within the text itself, and considers its possible social implications in terms of bolstering the traditional stereotype of career women as hard-nosed 'she-men' discussed in chapter III. Her evident concern regarding how viewers other than herself might have interpreted this episode in light of its discursive plurality similarly reflects her adoption of an analytical rhetorical mode of reception at this moment. Later, however, these concerns seem to have dissipated as Alison offers an analytical reading which discerns this episode's discursive content concerning the nature of contemporary motherhood:

> *What do you think this programme says about motherhood?*
> That...what a mother is meant to epitomise doesn't necessarily mean...somebody that's home from day one and there every day when you come home from school sort of thing.... And that a mother can be a professional woman.../.... I guess it was saying that...if you do chose a career...it's not

> undermining femininity or undermining what a woman should be. And that careers and motherhood aren't necessarily uncomplimentary. (Alison)

Other participants in this group adopted an *evaluative rhetorical* mode of reception and assessed that content in light of their existing discursive allegiances, typically in a way which affirmed and reiterated the privileged discursive voice of this episode. Alison, Robyn and to a lesser extent Matthew, Julie, Elizabeth and Maeve seemed particularly inclined to volunteer preferred evaluations of the discursive content of this episode, and consequently drew on the set of concepts, statements and themes provided within liberal-humanist discourse as interpretive resources in making sense of this depiction of motherhood in the 1990s. Most therefore expressed their agreement with the textual suggestion that mothering skills are *learned* social behaviours rather than biologically-innate drives, as illustrated in the following example:

> *What do you think this programme says about motherhood?*
> It was saying [that] it doesn't necessarily come naturally to people once you've had a child, motherhood, and that was I think Murphy Brown's experience.... It's not something that's innate, sort of within you, that you have these instincts.../.... I think that's just bullshit really. I think one of the comments made by Murphy Brown was that the guy Frank had more maternal instincts than her.... And she was commenting on his skills with the child and he basically said 'well, these skills were ones that I picked up from coming from a family and...these skills were things that were learnt, not born with'. And I'd go along with that too. There's really no such thing as a maternal instinct. What we refer to as maternal instincts are learned behaviours. (Matthew)

On those occasions where potentially problematic issues were raised by these participants, they were typically defused through recourse to liberal-humanist concepts and principles. Alison, for example, notes the 'complicating' factor of Murphy's status as a single, working mother in the following extract:

> *What sort of mother do you think Murphy's going to make?*
> There could possibly be times when, because she's career oriented and stuff, she might not be *there* when there is some major issue to be dealt with in the child's life. (Alison)

However, while other participants perceived this issue in terms of a conflict of interests between mother and child and effectively implied that Murphy should really sacrifice at least part of her career for the sake of her child, Alison reconciled these competing

demands by drawing on the liberal-humanist assertion that it is not imperative for *mothers* to be the full-time primary caregivers of their own offspring:

> But if there is a nanny that *is* there...if there is *somebody* to be there for that kid, then I don't think it necessarily has to be parents all the time. There are plenty of great nannies and they're more than willing to help take over that role. I don't think a mother has to be there one hundred percent of the time for it to be a good mother/child relationship. (Alison)

What is also evident in her response is the way in which contemporary liberal-humanist discourse constructs a split between the biological and social role of the 'mother', a division on which women's full participation in the public sphere presently relies. Implicit in such a distinction is a refutation and disruption of the historically dominant notion that the relationship between mother and child is characterised by a unique and irreplaceable emotional bond between them. While other discourses construct the preservation of that bond as key to ensuring children's future physical and emotional health, Alison's access to liberal-humanist discourse enables her to contest the uniqueness of this relationship and affirm the ability of other adults to fill the role of primary caregiver. This reading is clearly consistent with the privileged discursive voice of *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato.*

Divergent Receptions

For another group of participants in this study, certain aspects of the discursive content of *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* were regarded as problematic to a greater or lesser degree. These participants drew on various extra-textual interpretive resources in the process of constructing alternative readings of this episode's depiction of motherhood and Murphy Brown; readings which diverged in some respect from the privileged textual meanings identified in chapter III. For these viewers, making sense of this episode entailed a process of intermittently assessing the life world depicted on screen in terms of their own contradictory experiences and knowledges, their understandings of sitcom as a genre and television as a cultural form, or their pre-existing social and moral values and discursive allegiances.

Thus while David follows Elizabeth, Paul and Andrew in adopting a *transparent* mode of reception in relation to the issue of Murphy's maternal ineptitude, he simultaneously evaluates the 'real life' depicted in this episode in terms of his prior discursive allegiance, which is incompatible with the privileged discursive voice of this text. From other responses offered during the course of his interview, it was clear that David had access to moral right discourse and its idealised notion of the traditional

patriarchal nuclear family via his social group memberships as a devout Catholic and pro-life and pro-family activist. In the following extract, he draws on this concept of the 'ideal' family as a reference point in the production of meaning when asked to account for Murphy's apparent difficulties as a new mother:

> *Why do you think that Murphy had such a hard time coping with her baby?*
> She might have had no experience of having babies around her.... Or if she did, she was just into other things. First baby. Didn't seem to have her mother around. Didn't have the father's mother around or...help from the father's side. There's an obvious thing for, you know, *ideals.... Ideally the father would be around.* (David; emphasis added)

In effect, David's access to the oppositional discourse of the moral right leads him to construct Murphy's depicted struggle alone as *less than ideal* due to the absence of the child's father, a reading which diverges quite considerably from this episode's privileged liberal-humanist definition of the family in terms of affective rather than biological relations. As discussed in chapter III, this definition is explicitly articulated in Murphy's definitive response to Dan Quayle, where she asserts that "what really defines a family is commitment, caring and love" - *not* the presence or absence of the father.

Others among this group of participants adopted a *referential* mode of reception and drew on their stock of personal experiences and observations of the world around them in a way which effectively contested the privileged textual meaning that 'motherhood is hard work for the inexperienced'. Irene, for example, perceived the textual depiction of Murphy as struggling to cope with her new-born child as 'overdone' because in her experience, babies generally settled down pretty quickly:

> *What do you think this programme says about motherhood?*
> Well it intends to make it into the most overwhelming responsibility and experience doesn't it, that it is almost beyond human endurance. I felt that part of it was a little bit overdone because...babies do become accustomed to their surroundings very, very quickly and they don't wake at every sound.... I mean in an ordinary house, if you have the radio or the TV going, if the baby's asleep it won't wake because that's the normal procedure in that house.... [That's what I've] noticed in my experience anyway. (Irene)

Here, Irene's access to an alternative and indeed conflicting source of referential information effectively interrupts her reception of Murphy's problems as realistic and

accurate. This in turn evidently impedes the process of empathetic identification, and appears to facilitate Irene's negotiated evaluation of the message implicitly conveyed by the depiction of Murphy as struggling to cope with the considerable demands of caring for her new-born infant.

Similarly, Marjory drew from her knowledge and experience of the macro contexts of this episode's production and reception in dismissing the textual depiction of Murphy's solitary struggle as inaccurate 'nonsense'. In the following extract, she utilises her life-world experience of the available support services for new mothers in New Zealand, along with her evident insight into middle-class American life, as interpretive resources in the process of constructing a divergent reception of Murphy's difficulties:

> Oh I think that was just rubbish, any female who's got a few bob is not going to arrive home from the hospital with nobody to help her, for a start. I mean damn it, my mother had Karitane, she didn't know one end of a baby from the other but she had a Karitane nurse, and most others would have a grandmother or somebody there to help, so that was just a bit of nonsense.... It wasn't even the slightest bit realistic. She obviously had plenty of money, she lived in a great big house, its absolutely absurd. In the normal American situation she'd have had a Hispanic maid, because that's what they normally do have, so she'd have had a live-in maid anyway, if she'd been living on her own in a great big house. (Marjory)

It is interesting to note that Marjory's initial reference to Karitane nurses, a New Zealand institution offering practical support to new mothers, works to collapse the boundaries between America and her own cultural context, leading Marjory to assume that both countries would offer similar post-natal services. Here, culturally-specific knowledge and experience is being used as a yardstick against which the accuracy of this foreign representation of single motherhood can be gauged. Conversely, Marjory's second reference to 'Hispanic maids' is significant both because it indicates her simultaneous perception of cultural *difference*, and because it provides a second measure against which this textual depiction is (once again) judged to be lacking. That is to say, regardless of the *source* of the referential information Marjory draws on, Murphy's depicted struggle remains unrecognisable, and is therefore dismissed as 'absurd'.

A perceptibly different mode of reception was adopted by Sue, for whom estrangement from Murphy Brown appears to have facilitated a heightened perception of the textual and generic imperatives underlying this episode's production. In the following extract,

for example, Sue adopts a *mediated* mode of reception and suggests that Murphy's difficulties have been intentionally engineered by the producers of this episode in order to provide the narrative complication on which the story and humour depends:

> *Why do you think that Murphy had such a hard time coping with her baby?*
> I think she had to.... It wouldn't have been normal if the baby was sleeping all the time. Often (laughs) they've [put] pins or something...in the cots to make the babies cry, because the babies have to *do* something, you know?
> *What, on the programme?*
> On the programme, yeah. If the baby was quiet and slept...it would be nothing...to have a comedy about, I suppose. It's just dealing with the problems of having a baby and all the funny things that could happen that all *did* happen.... They have to make a comedy of it, and they have to deal with it in a funny way. The baby had to cry...for the whole programme to be. (Sue)

The *form* of this account clearly differs from that evident in Sue's earlier assertion that Murphy's problems were unrealistic in relation to her own experience, thus demonstrating the ability of viewers to commute between different modes of reception and effectively construct alternative interpretations of the same textual 'information'. Depending on which mode Sue adopts at any one moment, Murphy's problems can be read as unrealistic and hence unbelievable, or alternatively (and perhaps simultaneously) as purely fictional dilemmas designed to entertain and amuse viewers. It should also be noted that the above reading is marked by a certain psychological distance from the text that is typical of readers in the mediated mode, and which is also consistent with Sue's lack of empathetic identification with Murphy as the central narrative protagonist.

Conversely for John, an American immigrant, identification with Murphy's struggle appeared to have been itself interrupted due to his enhanced sensitivity to the 'constructedness' of this episode, as noted in the previous chapter. In the following extract, John adopts a mediated mode of reception and draws on his understanding of the generic imperatives of this programme (in terms of its need to generate humour) when asked if he was able to identify with Murphy's problems:

> *Can you identify with Murphy's problems at all?*
> To some extent. To some extent.
> *In what way? Were there any particular problems that you felt you could relate to?*

> The uncertainty with the baby, but she over-emphasised all that. And that's the show as well, it's trying to produce a ridiculous situation. (John).

Clearly, John was at least partly estranged from Murphy as the central narrative protagonist, not because of a lack of recognition of the similarities between her experiences and his own, but rather due to his generalised adverse reaction to the form of this text as one in the genre of American television sitcom, of which he was frequently critical during the course of his interview. Reflecting his adoption of a mediated mode of reception, John's account of Murphy's difficulties as a new mother highlights features relating to the textual aesthetics of this episode, specifically in terms of its stereotypical *characterisation* of Murphy as 'a career woman reporter':

> *Why do you think [Murphy] has such a hard time coping with her baby?*
> Reverting to stereotypes, well the career woman, no maternal instinct at all...the one always in control, and when you've got babies you're not in control, the situation is far beyond your control. Many times it is a reactive position that one is in, not a pro-active one.
> *And do you think she has a hard time dealing with that?*
> Yeah, that's the stereotype of her character.
> *You said that she doesn't have any maternal instincts, do you think there's a reason why she doesn't?*
> That's the *stereotype*, whether or not she has, you know if I'd watched more episodes of the programme it may have fleshed out more on that, I've no idea, it's just the stereotype. I wouldn't want/
> *Stereotype of what?*
> Of the career woman reporter. (John)

The fact that John highlights the constructedness of both this episode and Murphy Brown as *a fictional character-type* testifies to his adoption of a mediated mode of reading in which certain features of textual production are rendered highly significant to the process of meaning construction. It also seems that John's adoption of this particular mode effectively mitigates against his complete acceptance of the privileged textual attribution of Murphy's difficulties, since he views these as the product of a stereotypical representation of career women *rather than* the product of Murphy's inexperience and lack of knowledge concerning early infant care. As these examples suggest, participants who consistently adopted a mediated mode of reception were typically less involved in Murphy's story as the central narrative protagonist, and were typically also less receptive to this episode's discursive content.

A similarly distanced approach to viewing this episode was evident among those participants whose divergent readings reflected an *analytical rhetorical* mode of reception. Marjory appears to have adopted this mode in the following extract, in which she points to the potentially negative social implications of this episode's depiction of maternal ineptitude and considers its possible effects on younger, more susceptible female viewers:

> *What does this programme say about motherhood, do you think?*
> Nothing worth bothering about, and probably giving a very bad impression to some impressionable young girls who haven't much education or much intelligence.
> *In what way?*
> Well I mean she held it all wrong...not once did she hold it in the correct position for burping it, till that man came in and showed her how to do it, and even then she didn't hold it properly, and I just think it was a bad example. (Marjory)

A number among this group of divergent readers appeared to have access to one or more discourses of the wider social world other than that privileged in *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato*, either through particular social group memberships, or by virtue of their citizenship of this different cultural context. At times, these subordinated and extra-textual discourses were explicitly drawn on by participants in the course of evaluating the propositional content of this episode around motherhood and *Murphy Brown*. One such alternative discursive repertoire was child-centred discourse, which, as discussed in chapter IV, emphasises the needs, interests and rights of the child. This locally-circulating discourse provided a key interpretive resource for Don, as it did for a number of the participants in this study.[1] For Don, the textual suggestion that Murphy could learn how to be a mother did not fit entirely comfortably with his more child-centred focus on the needs of young children, a focus which was frequently articulated in the course of our discussion. In the following extract, Don initially affirms the privileged textual message that motherhood is learned, but then immediately contests that message by drawing on the child-centred notion that children may suffer the consequences of maternal ineptitude:

> *What sort of mother do you think she will make?*
> She was learning. The hard way. She was sort of learning how to hold a baby. Mind you, you hear all this business about how certain things are decided early in childhood and so on, and while things were in the rough stage, what was happening to the baby? How insecure was the baby getting? She was obviously getting heaps of advice from all sorts of people when...she should have known these things. But she was probably slowly learning them. (Don)

Don's response mirrors a much wider cultural debate between child-centred and liberal-humanist discourses. Drawing on elements of both these competing frameworks, Don effectively constructs parenting as a socially learned activity *and* as essential to get right for the sake of children's future development. Thus in his account, the privileged textual message (motherhood is learned) is accepted only in part, and not without the added qualification that being a less than competent mother may have negative consequences for children. Don's partial acceptance of the message of this episode is a key feature of his *negotiated rhetorical* evaluation of this episode.

Kimi engaged in a rather more complex process of discursive negotiation when considering what sort of mother Murphy would make. Kimi initially voices the privileged liberal-humanist construction of mothering as an acquired set of social behaviours which even Murphy can learn:

> *What sort of mother do you think she'll make?*
> I think she'll probably make an excellent mum, after all is said and done, because she'll probably learn how to become natural with her son - if she keeps on reading up on things and going to parenting classes, I mean. (Kimi)

As she continues, however, Kimi becomes increasingly uncertain, and modifies her initially positive assessment:

> I don't really know whether she'd make a good mum. I suppose because it's a TV programme she'd have to make a good mum in the end, you know.

Here, Murphy is no longer a potentially *excellent* mum - Kimi is not sure she will even make a very *good* mum. Some degree of optimism resurfaces as Kimi momentarily commutes to a mediated mode of reception and acknowledges one of the primary conventions of television sitcom narrative structure - that of the inevitably happy resolution. Murphy will indeed "have to make a good mum in the end", because this is

television, after all! In yet another shift, the dangers of *over-learning* motherhood are introduced, apparently leading to an undesirable excess of maternal feeling:

> But I think she'll learn with the baby and...she's probably one of those neurotic over-protective mums and have to go...to eight different classes, you know...but I'm not saying that's not a good thing....

Just as in the episode itself, Kimi then juxtaposes this construction of Murphy as in some way irrationalised by virtue of her entry into the feminine sphere of motherhood, with an image of Murphy as *masculinised* via her excessive success within the public sphere, and suggests that "She'd probably provide. She might be a very good provider....". Here, Kimi implies that Murphy might become a somewhat distant and aloof breadwinner and father-figure of sorts, since she has taken on the masculine mode of subjectivity required for success in the public sphere, a reading which is clearly consistent with the *subordinated* discursive voice of this episode. Finally, Kimi struggles with the issue of balancing motherhood with full-time employment and the needs of young children:

> I mean I can't really say whether she'd be a good mum but if she balanced her work and...the time that she spent with her son...I can't she why she *couldn't* be a good mum. It would only be if she...did employ a nanny full time and worked full time, I couldn't see her being that great a mum, yeah. (Kimi)

In the course of this account, Kimi has effectively shifted from a preferred evaluative mode to a negotiated one and finally assesses the textual depiction of Murphy in light of her prior allegiance to child-centred discourse. This locally-circulating discourse is most likely accessible to Kimi via her occupational group memberships as an early childcare worker and former primary school teacher. In accordance with the themes, concepts and statements provided within this discursive framework, Kimi affirms the needs of children to have their *mothers* spend time with them rather than *mother-substitutes* such as nannies, a construction which effectively precludes women in full-time employment from being good mothers. So while Kimi appears to accept the textual suggestion that Murphy can *learn* to be a mother, her reading clearly works *against* another textual implication that Murphy can successfully reconcile motherhood with her professional journalistic career. The privileged discursive voice of this episode is thus only partially affirmed, and Kimi clearly retains some discursively-grounded reservations about the ability of working mothers such as Murphy Brown to make very *good* mothers.

For David, evaluating what sort of mother Murphy would likely make similarly entailed a process of negotiation whereby the propositional content of this episode was initially confirmed but then disrupted through the re-articulation of this episode's subordinated voice - moral right discourse. David begins by reiterating the textual suggestion that what really defines both a family and good parenting is commitment, caring and love, as is explicitly stated by Murphy in her televised response to Quayle's comments in Scene 14:

> *What sort of mother do you think Murphy will make?*
> Oh, well if she sticks by those three, well, virtuous things then she'd make a good mother. (David)

But while emphasising the *desirability* of these attributes, David implicitly questions their *sufficiency* by drawing on the concept of 'family values', the teaching of which is constructed as a primary responsibility of parents within moral right discourse:

> Oh, I wonder.... I wonder what she would teach him about values, family values, yeah.
> *What do you think she would teach him?*
> Oh, I really don't know.
> *Why is that of concern to you?*
> Well it's going to affect the choices that, Billy, Bobby, makes isn't it? It's going to affect that choices he makes.... I suppose you want what's best for him. Some values are definitely better than others.... So that would be saying...that it's better to have two parents. If that's the ideal that means it's better isn't it? (David)

Evaluating this episode's propositional content in relation to his prior discursive allegiance, David suggests that Murphy's status as an *unwed* mother effectively precludes her from making the *best possible* mother, since by raising her child alone, Murphy is providing her child with a less than ideal model of family life. Again, this reading clearly conflicts with this episode's explicitly privileged affirmation of single parent families. Yet David evidently accepts *some* aspects of the discursive content of this episode - he subsequently re-emphasised his belief that commitment, caring and love are important aspects of both good parenting and a good family life. However in David's negotiated evaluation of the message of this episode, parents should also teach their children good family values, preferably through their own example.

Moral right and child-centred discourses were most often articulated by those participants who offered *oppositional* evaluations of this episode's propositional content relating to motherhood and *Murphy Brown*. Such evaluations appeared to be linked to social group memberships in the case of Melanie and Sue, both regular church goers and also actively involved in the pro-life movement. These participants often drew from one or other discourse (and sometimes both simultaneously) in the course of expressing their disagreement with this episode's privileged textual meanings. This process is evident in the following extract, in which Melanie contests the textual implication that Murphy will be a good mother despite her status as a single, working woman. She does so by drawing on the child-centred concept that under-five year olds need concentrated time and attention in tandem with the moral right assumption that the natural mother is responsible for providing that undivided care during those all-important early years:

> *What sort of mother do you think she'll make?*
> Not so good, I don't think.
> *Why is that?*
> Because she's a career woman. She's going to plonk it onto a nanny. And that's not good. I think when they're little you have to put a certain amount of time into them. Whether you like it or not. And women who don't do have problems with the child.... And I don't really agree with career women. Unless they can do a job part-time.... The first year is very important with a baby. In fact the first five years are very important. After that they're starting to get little characters and doing things away from you, but up till then it's a very important time. Certainly the first year. (Melanie)

Implicit in Melanie's response is the notion of maternal sacrifice so reified within the discourse of the moral right. In terms of this (oppositional) discourse, good mothers are those who subsume their own selfish needs and desires in the interests of their children. Those women who fail to make the necessary sacrifices and put their children first are by definition bad mothers, and will ultimately suffer the consequences, as is suggested by Melanie's comment that "women who don't do have problems with the child". Within this discourse, a woman's participation in full-time work is constructed as incompatible with motherhood, since it would effectively deprive her children of the constant maternal care and attention that is their birthright. This view is more explicitly articulated by Sue in this extract:

Do you think that women can be successful in their careers and still be good mothers?
Hold a full-time job? No I don't think they can, I think something will suffer, their children will suffer, although I mean one of my friends says "oh, you know, my children are crèche children and they're good kids" but I don't think it's totally healthy for the child. I believe that really women should stay at home and look after their children. Either you have children, or you have your job. If the mother wants a career, then I don't believe she should have children. (Sue)

Here, Sue articulates the notion that motherhood and career are incompatible options between which women should choose since, unlike men, women can't have it both ways.

Finally, a very strong allegiance to moral right discourse underpins Courtney's *critical rhetorical* reception of the latent message of this episode in relation to motherhood. In the following exchange, Courtney frames her objection to this content in terms of a much broader critique of moral relativism, the source of which becomes apparent as she goes on to declare her own (contrary) belief in the existence of a fundamental truth and universal moral law grounded in Christian doctrine:

What do you think this programme says about motherhood?
It gives the impression that motherhood is purely a woman's choice...first and foremost and everything else is secondary. It's very much that anything the woman wants to do is quite acceptable...no one else can comment or have input, it's just the mother's choice the whole way. Which is the way society's going.
What do you think about that idea?
I guess it goes on that vein that we live in a humanistic society and everyone does what is right in their own eyes, we have our own values, I mean if it feels right to us we can basically do it. The whole value system these days is challenged...there's no checks and balances and right and wrong is even grey now. There's no black and white. So those are the main streams of opinion.
What is your opinion?
I believe there are definite right and wrongs.... I believe there are natural laws of life as there are God's laws, and we can ignore them at our own peril but we won't break His laws, they will break us. (Courtney)

While most participants confined the scope of their receptions to this episode's more 'obvious' discursive content around motherhood and the family, Courtney looks beyond this *manifest* message to consider the *latent* meaning of this text, which she

situates within the context of a shift within the wider social realm from traditional family values to liberal-humanism. In so doing, Courtney effectively reads against the grain of this episode and critiques what she regards as its implicit affirmation of individual sovereignty in accordance with her own prior allegiance to moral right discourse.

Redefining 'The Family'

As discussed in chapter III, this episode privileges a liberal-humanist definition of family relations through its assertion that families come in all shapes and sizes, and that what really defines a family is caring, commitment and love. This message is literally articulated by Murphy in her 'live to air' speech in Scene 14. Here, Murphy responds to the charges made by vice president Quayle via a mode of direct address and argues that single-parent families should be accepted as part of an inclusive liberal-humanist revision of the contemporary American family. The purpose of the following discussion is to consider the way in which this message and Murphy's speech itself (which in many ways constitutes the defining moment of the episode in terms of its attempt to secure its preferred meaning at the point of reception) were received by the participants in this study.

Getting the Message

Consistent with the findings of Philo (1990), Corner et al. (1990), Kitzinger (1993) and Roscoe et al. (1995), this text can clearly be seen to have 'set the agenda' for viewers' interpretations of it. That is to say, the majority of responses fell within the parameters laid down by the episode itself, in that they largely reiterated its rhetoric concerning, in particular, the need for tolerance of alternative family structures. In making a preferred rhetorical evaluation of this propositional content, participants needed to accept (at least in part) the liberal-humanist assumptions of tolerance and pluralism underpinning Murphy's defence of alternative family organisations. Most evidently did accept those assumptions, and offered *preferred evaluations* of this episode's liberal-humanist defence of single-parent families, as exemplified by the following responses:

> *Do you think this programme was trying to tell you anything, was there a message in there?*
> I suppose there was a message saying that it doesn't really matter, you don't *have* to have a mother and father as parents, there's plenty of other people out there that are solo parents.
> *Do you think that's a good message for them to be putting across?*

> Yeah! Yeah I do. It's like in my opinion, everyone to their own, sort of thing, if you are happy and you're not hurting anyone. (Robyn)

> I agree totally with what Murphy Brown said...it's irrelevant whether you have one parent, two parents or no parents. It's the relationship, it's the relevance of the relationship, and that is built on support, trust, love. (Alison)

> Just that there's all kinds of different families, live and let live.... Families are more than just mum dad and kids, there's other family makeups. They're not to be put down just because they're different. (John)

In certain cases, participants' understandings and evaluations of the discursive content of this episode appeared to be linked to their particular array of social group membership(s). Julie, for example, became an unwed mother as a teenager in the late 1960s, whereas Elizabeth became a solo mother through divorce. Both made repeated references to their own experiences as members of that stigmatised social group during their interviews, and appeared to draw from that membership in constructing their understandings of the message of this episode:

> I think this episode was perhaps [intended] to bring a few issues to people who may be disapproving of solo parents and single mothers.... To wake the world up to the fact that maybe there are other ways families live their lives apart from what's judged to be the normal picture of mum, dad and the kids. Sometimes families can't exist like that and they need to have different set ups. (Julie)

> To me, that episode was all about labelling people.... [N]o matter what the circumstances are, whether a woman chooses to have a child...or whether there's been a divorce...the labelling always goes on the woman.... There's a man in there somewhere, he's in the background not getting any flak. The woman gets it all, and the woman has got a fairly hard time. To me the message that's coming across there was, 'let's cut this labelling and look at how much love is given to the child and not the circumstances' because if they're saying, 'oh, a solo mum', well there's all sorts of circumstances that go into that and the woman has a hard enough job without that crap. (Elizabeth)

For these women in particular, Murphy's speech comprised a pleasurable and well-delivered rebuttal to Quayle's conservative discourse, along with a much appreciated affirmation of single parents:

> I did enjoy the bit at the end where she put it to the nation through the news programme just quietly and calmly, like what these people had said and the implications of what they were saying and introducing them to so many single parent families. (Julie)

> I thought it was great. I liked it. I liked the way she used sarcasm in the end. But I think her point had to be made that you know, 'the state of the economy may have been due to da, da, da, da, da, da, da, all these major factors but nevertheless we're not going to look at that, it could be me personally' and I thought that was clever. I thought it was well done the way she said it. Solo mums or solo dads are doing a really hard job and it's hard going on your own having that responsibility and they need a pat on the back, not put downs. Yeah. And she did very well. (Elizabeth)

It is clear, however, that being a solo mother did not *prescribe* the mode of reading adopted by those who shared that particular social group membership. Like Elizabeth, Maeve is a solo mother through divorce. But she is also a graduate student in the humanities, unionist activist and Labour Party worker, and it seems that these particular aspects of her multi-faceted identity were more relevant to her reception of Murphy's speech. Whereas Elizabeth and Julie derived considerable pleasure from this episode's affirmation of single parenthood, Maeve assumed the stance of the 'left-wing intellectual' and offered a *critical rhetorical* reception which made sense of this defining moment in terms *other than* those laid down by the text itself. That is to say, she effectively moves beyond the *textually-defined* terrain (which pits Quayle's 'traditional family values' against Murphy's liberal affirmation of alternative family structures) to offer a socialist-inspired critique of Murphy's speech as an articulation of 'educated, white middle-class' American values:

> I think Murphy's views of the commitment and love might be a bit too ideal, because there are so many families who are now in danger, especially because of domestic violence, or poverty, so that's perhaps an ideal view, but in reality its not that easy.../.... It doesn't show that a lot of people don't have the value of three good meals a day, there's a lot of poverty in America, as there is in New Zealand, and I think it mainly shows the values of the educated, white middle-class American. So it doesn't really show the fact that a lot of people don't have the valuable assets of a home, of good food, nice surroundings, stable job and all that. (Maeve)

Here, Maeve can be seen to resist and subvert the *latent* message of this episode, which she conceives as an expression of hegemonic values. In the process, she goes beyond simply expressing her acceptance of, or disagreement with, the manifest discursive content of this episode, and effectively redefines the agenda for discussion in terms which reflect her *own* political beliefs and affiliations. It should be noted, however, that Maeve did not appear to assume a stable or permanent position as a 'critical' viewer, and offered readings of this nature only intermittently. Her overall response to this episode was generally a positive and affirming one.

Finally, it is interesting to note that while Kimi's occupation offered a source of competing referential information in relation to this episode's representation of *motherhood*, it simultaneously provided confirming referential insights in relation to this episode's affirmation of alternative family structures. In the following extract, Kimi's experiences as a crèche supervisor can be seen as instrumental in shaping her preferred evaluation of this text's discursive content around the family:

> [It was] just letting people know that a family doesn't have to be your typical nuclear family to be a functional family. As she said, as long as there was loving and caring and commitment...single parent families aren't necessarily dysfunctional.... [I]t's not about...mums and dads, it's about caring for your children.
> .../....
> *Do you agree with that message?*
> I do agree with it, because where I work we see a lot of two-parent families whose children are dirty and my friends are solo parents and they're all excellent mothers who have nice clean happy babies that are stimulated and cared for, and I see a lot of two-parent families where the woman is so tied up with what the husband's on about, that the kids come second. So I mean you can have lesbian families and all sorts of families, and I don't think it's anything to do with the nuclear family. I think it's how you are with your children really. (Kimi)

The consistency with which the participants in this study identified the discursive content of this episode as constituting a defence of single-parent families suggests that textual polysemy was, in the case of *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato*, relatively tightly constrained by the structure and content of the narrative and key passages of dialogue, most notably Murphy's speech in Scene 14. Clearly, this text was relatively (although not *totally*) effective in terms of closing off the 'play' of meaning and securing a relatively narrow range of interpretations of its discursive content at the point of reception. However, while there was relatively little dispute concerning what the

message of this text actually *was*, there was considerable divergence in terms of how that message was perceived and *evaluated*, as the following section reveals.

Reading Differently

Despite this episode's relatively closed structure and the explicit nature of its discursive content, the potential remained for participants to adopt alternative modes of reception and read differently. As discussed in the previous chapter, Yuan's exclusive adoption of a *mediated* mode of reception effectively precluded any form of engagement with the content of this episode. A similar phenomenon can be seen in the case of Don, who refuted my suggestion that this programme was trying to get a serious message across to viewers, on the grounds that the intention of its producers was to *entertain* rather than persuade:

> *Do you think this programme was trying to tell you anything?*
> I would say it was mainly meant for entertainment.
> .../....
> *Do you think that it had a particular message that it wanted to get across to viewers?*
> I doubt it.../.... I thought they were just trying to have a comedy, they were poking fun at something that could happen, that was good for a laugh. (Don)

Here, Don adopts a mediated mode of reception and effectively resists the very notion that a sitcom can convey a serious message. This reading did not, however, appear to interrupt Don's engagement with the discursive content of this episode to the extent that it did with Yuan, Marjory and John.

Alternative understandings of that content remained possible as participants' made sense of this text in relation to their existing sets of knowledge and experience, social group memberships and discursive competencies. Irene, for example, drew on her observations of the media's influence in recent local government campaigns as well as her past executive involvement in various trade unions and political lobby groups in reading 'against the grain' of this episode. She consequently understood Murphy's speech as an attempt by the producers of this episode to demonstrate their own power to change public opinion:

> When she got up and defended the unconventional family situation...she did that very well I thought, and the ability of somebody who is articulate and can put a good case to change public opinion was very clearly shown.... And of course he was a very inept vice president, he used to say stupid things, and *I suppose they*

> *capitalised on that.... I think probably the power of the media came through very clearly in that, didn't it.../....* Certainly for me it did show a thing which I am very aware of because I have seen it happen. In fact I saw a Mayor in Hamilton tipped out simply because...the Waikato Times had a campaign [against him].... It was just a local thing and yet a very popular and very confident Mayor got beaten...and it opened my eyes to the power of the media.../.... After all, *the media has to make that point too. That's part of them, isn't it, to make the point that they are an influence on public opinion*, which they are. (Irene; emphasis added)

Irene's response is significant in that looks beyond the *manifest* message of this episode to consider its *latent* meaning and the *motivations* of producers. Judging by the analogy she draws between this episode and a Waikato Times campaign against a former Hamilton Mayor, it appears that Irene conceives those motivations in terms of an attempt to influence public opinion *against* the American vice president, Dan Quayle. While my initial question clearly invites participants to assume an analytical rhetorical mode and identify the discursive content of this episode, the majority of participants confined their analysis to its more 'obvious' content around motherhood and the family. Irene's reading, conversely, is framed at this moment by a *critical rhetorical* mode of reception, leading her to redefine the agenda for discussion in terms of this episode's implicit rearticulation of its own social and political significance. As in the case of Maeve, however, Irene's assumption of a critical mode of reception was not consistent, and her responses were more generally framed in terms of referential and evaluative rhetorical modes of reception.

There were also substantial deviations in terms of how the manifest discursive content of this episode was received by differently positioned participants. Courtney and Sue, for example, explicitly *rejected* Murphy's liberal definition of the family. In the following extract, Courtney adopts an *analytical rhetorical* mode and reflects on the 'manipulative intent' behind the textual construction of Murphy's 'live-to-air' response to Quayle's assertions:

> It was interesting to see how emotive it was at the end, because they gave Murphy more airplay than they did the Senator and she came across as the great big hero and that was quite emotive.
>
> .../....
>
> *The bit at the end when Murphy talks to the media, what stuck out in your mind about that?*

> The fact that she made no reference to society as a whole needing...firm and good foundations in the home.... I guess it was quite subtle in the way it reflected on economic conditions, the Senator of the day's term of office, as opposed to some of the more basic foundations of our society which I believe is the home. And it was saying 'because I am *not* of a minority now days, because of the way things are going, let's attack from the other side' instead of saying that I do believe there's a family and it's important as the foundation of our society. She was totally lacking in that area. And no understanding that there's an important cornerstone in our society...[and] at the end of the day...children need security and society is based on the family. (Courtney)

Here, Courtney identifies in some detail what was *not* articulated by this episode, but in her view *should* have been said. Importantly, her analysis is limited to consideration of the manifest discursive content of this episode, differentiating it from the critical reading offered by Irene above. Courtney's assessment of the motivations of this episode's producers thus highlights their more immediately apparent intention of skewing things in favour of Murphy's explicit liberal-humanist message of tolerance for alternative family structures. The agenda for Courtney's discussion is thus defined *by the text itself*, and is consistent with its internal juxtaposition between Quayle's 'traditional family values' and Murphy's liberal-humanist affirmation of single parent families. Courtney consequently perceives Murphy's speech as inadequate, emotive and biased in its attempt to persuade viewers to adopt a liberal perspective, and as occluding the essential truth that the traditional nuclear family is the fundamental unit of human society. Obviously, this reading is strongly marked by Courtney's religious beliefs and related social group memberships.

Not surprisingly, religious group memberships also appeared to be the common factor in informing respondents' *negotiated rhetorical* evaluations of the discursive content of *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* concerning the family. While of different denominations, Barbara, Irene, David, Jill and Don all professed to have strong religious beliefs and are regular church goers. They were also evidently unwilling to accept this episode's liberal-humanist affirmation of single parents and 'alternative' families without qualification. Generally, these reservations were framed in terms of a wish to preserve the traditional nuclear family as the *ideal* form of family organisation, while simultaneously acknowledging the contemporary reality depicted in this episode, as David's response illustrates:

> *What do you think it was trying to get across?*
> That families are not all like mother and a father and children.

> *And what do you think of that message?*
> It's just the way things are. But for sure, *if you can have a family with the two parents it's better. It's probably more ideal.* But you know, situations are not always like that. Sometimes people make it like that, but sometimes it's just out of their control. That's the way it goes. But yeah, *[it's] probably better if there are two.* (David; emphasis added)

In terms of this negotiated evaluation, Murphy's assertion that "whether by choice or circumstance, families come in all shapes and sizes" is only partially accepted as a fact of modern-day life which David and others appeared almost *resigned* to, and these alternative family structures continue to be perceived as less desirable that the traditional nuclear family. As discussed in chapter IV, this understanding is central to the discourse of the moral right, which these participants were clearly able to access through their religious beliefs and related group memberships.

Other participants drew on extra-textual discourses accessible within their own cultural location in constructing their negotiated evaluations of this episode's discursive content around 'the family'. Irene, for example, problematised the liberal-humanist notion of freedom of individual choice affirmed by Murphy Brown in Scene 14 by raising the issue of *parental responsibility* so pivotal within child-centred discourse:

> *Do you think there were any points of view that weren't represented in this programme at all?*
> It was totally justifying...her right to choose and do what she liked.... While I think free choice is marvellous, I think that with free choice must come consideration for other people.... When you are considering the question of solo parenting you have to think about that. Maybe you have got the perfect right to have a baby if you want to have one, but you have also got an absolute responsibility to do the best you can for that child. But...[it wasn't] terribly stressed in that you see, it was just her right to do what she wanted to do which was stressed...which I think probably was wrong. The responsibility that she had to that child...should have been stressed a bit. (Irene)

Irene's acceptance of the discursive content of this episode was thus to some extent constrained by her recognition of the competing needs and rights of children, to whom even single parents owe the unmitigated obligation of doing the best they can. As noted in chapter IV, child-centred discourse was in general circulation within the macro context of this episode's reception by the New Zealand participants involved in this study.

Religious group memberships and related access to a competing discourse of the wider social world proved most relevant in shaping *oppositional rhetorical* evaluations of this episode's liberal-humanist affirmation of solo parenthood among a small group of participants. Jill, Sue, Melanie and Courtney all had access to the discourse of the moral right by virtue of their strong religious beliefs, with the latter three being commonly involved in the *same* pro-life and pro-family lobby group. For these participants, *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato*'s explicit defence of alternative family structures was inconsistent with their shared belief that the traditional nuclear family provides the ideal context for childbearing and rearing, a belief that was often explicitly grounded in Christian doctrine. Thus, while Jill earlier offered a preferred evaluation of this episode's content around *motherhood* and Murphy Brown (as discussed above), she made it clear that the conscious decision to become a single mother did not sit well with her own religious views and allegiance to the discourse of the moral right:

> To my mind it's nutty to specifically choose to go out and have a child without the rest of the relationships that go towards making a child happen in the first place. Because...[with] my Christian traditional beliefs I don't think that's where familyhood is at. I think it's all lopsided that she should think that, I mean I don't think she's got the issue straight when she's going out to have a baby out of wedlock. (Jill)

Access to the discourse of the moral right was also evident in Sue's oppositional evaluation of this episode's discursive content around 'the family':

> *What are good family values, in your opinion?*
> As laid out in the Bible, I believe the mother is [meant] to look after the family, the father is to take primary responsibility for the family.
> *Do you think that this programme favours any particular definition of the family?*
> Ah, it favours the solo...mothers, [the idea that] sex is free, have a baby, but don't let the baby bother you, the only reason it's going to bother you is if it stays awake all night.... Get on with life.... A children really is [only] a temporary disability.... I don't believe that it's teaching very good family values, no. I don't believe in that. (Sue)

Drawing on the set of themes, concepts and statements made available within this competing discourse, Sue suggested that this episode was "trying to say that it was normal and okay for people to have children out of wedlock.../.... And justifying it really".

While religious group memberships were clearly most influential in shaping the oppositional evaluations of these participants, other aspects of their multi-faceted identities were also relevant. In some instances, these provided additional sources of oppositionality. For Sue, discursive opposition to this episode's normalisation of reproduction outside of marriage was apparently bolstered by a profound sense of lack concerning the death of her father during her own childhood. In other instances, however, different group memberships appeared to limit the scope of participants' oppositional readings. For example, while Melanie reiterated Dan Quayle's assertion that the producers of this series were "trying to glamorise...solo motherhood", the degree of her opposition to the discursive content of this episode appeared to be tempered by her many years of social work experience. For Melanie, the physical presence and involvement of the father was considered of greater significance than the 'formality' of legal marriage so reified within Quayle's moral right discourse, and also privileged by Sue above:

> *Do you agree with that message [that solo motherhood is glamorous]?*
> Well no, I don't, because I think that families need fathers. And I think the baby should have had a father. Even if they weren't married, he should have been around, I feel.... 'Cause it wasn't complete to me. And I think that was a...bad sort of lifestyle to promote or highlight. (Melanie)

Finally, the only participant who can be said to have consistently adopted a *critical rhetorical* mode of reception was Courtney. The centrality of religious beliefs and related group memberships to Courtney's reception of this episode was made explicit in an unsolicited opening statement in which she effectively positioned herself from the very outset as a 'critical' viewer:

> *Have you seen Murphy Brown before?*
> No, I haven't, no. And I'd just like to start by saying that one thing that's really struck me from when I watched was that, when we break God's laws, the laws will end up breaking us.... And I think about the law of gravity, if we choose to go up to the top of Cinema 5 and to fall off that building and say like, 'I'm going to defy this law, and I will fall but not injure myself'...we won't break that law, but the law itself will break us, and destroy us in effect in the long term.
> *So what is the law of God that you see as being broken here?*
> There's...many many laws that man in essence tries to break, thinking that we will break those laws and still survive, but we end up...damaged because of those breakages.
> *Damaged, in what sorts of ways?*

Emotionally, spiritually, physically. (Courtney)

In making this initial statement, Courtney very deliberately draws on her access to an alternative interpretative framework (that of moral right discourse) to express her objection to what she regards as the *latent* message of this episode: that it is possible to disobey the laws of God and remain intact. Reading 'against the grain' of this text, Courtney redefines the agenda for her discussion of the issues raised by this episode in terms that are consistent with her own religious beliefs and related group memberships. She consequently 'reads' *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* as offering ample evidence of the folly of going against the laws of God, and as symptomatic of a wider turn against the traditional moral values that are, according to the moral right, the pre-condition of social order and spiritual health. In these terms, Courtney regards Murphy's 'choice' to raise her child outside wedlock as a violation of moral principles and laws designed by God to protect her spiritual well-being. She consequently reconstructs the discursive content of this episode in terms of its *implicit* challenge to traditional values, as opposed to its more obvious affirmation of single parent families:

Is this episode trying to tell you anything, do you think? Is there a particular message that the programme makers are trying to get across?
I think they want to see how far they can go, I think they want challenge traditional values, in essence.../.... And [they're] saying 'this is the way of the world, let's embrace it and let's go with it, 'cause it's happening anyway, so we should just embrace it'.
And what do you think about that message?
It is happening, but I don't believe it's the ideal. (Courtney)

Understanding the Link Between Modes of Reception and Social Group Membership

While the small-scale, exploratory nature of this research renders it inappropriate to make more than tentative links between modes of reception and social group memberships, the interview data provides ample evidence that such memberships are indeed central to the way in which differently positioned individuals approach the process of sense construction. This centrality was often explicitly acknowledged by participants, as the following remarks illustrate:

Do you think this programme has influenced the way that you think about motherhood at all?
No, because her opinions are very much my opinions.... *When you are in an environment like the University*, where...open-mindedness has been encouraged when it comes to issues like the family, *especially in Law*, then to a certain extent you expected it of others..... I think we are being encouraged to take off our blinkers and take a look around and to accept that there is no universal...no representative family. (Alison; emphasis added)

My views are pretty much on the pro-life camp.../.... *I get a lot of my views from...being a Catholic* really. (David; emphasis added)

I've just noticed that I've gone really women's libby in the whole damned thing and I didn't actually intend to, but *it's just an issue that I've experienced and I've also been into a lot of study at the polytech on women's issues*.... I don't think I would have felt like this...unless I'd experienced it. (Elizabeth; emphasis added)

Any idea why Quayle might have [made those remarks]?
...There are people from pretty right-wing moralistic backgrounds who aspire to speak for America.... I know where they're coming from because I've been there myself. So I can quite understand.
Been there yourself, in what way?
Well, *I was raised in a Brethren [community] where family life and morals were absolutely sacrosanct*, and people who lived together without being married were vilified, and young people who engaged in sexual activity before marriage were castigated.... *Having grown up in that environment I've got a complete understanding of where...guys [like Quayle] are coming from.* (Michael; emphasis added)

However, while interpretation is clearly patterned at the level of social group membership, it is also evident that the position of individuals within particular social groups is not static or fixed, and that social subjects are members of many such groups simultaneously. They are consequently able to draw from any of the available aspects of their multi-faceted identities, depending on their salience to the issues at hand. Hence, the content or form of any individual reception cannot be predetermined on the basis of that person's membership of any particular social group, since they will not necessarily draw on even the most seemingly relevant aspects of their identity in making sense of any given text, and may utilise these memberships in unpredictable ways. A case in point is the considerable divergence between the receptions of

Courtney and Yuan, both of whom are devout Christians, and who were originally contacted through their involvement in the same pro-life organisation. Whereas Courtney's encounter with this American sitcom episode was characterised by her intense opposition to its discursive *content*, Yuan's was characterised by an equally intense resistance to its *form*, leading him to refuse any level of engagement with that content. So while religious beliefs and related group memberships were clearly most salient for Courtney, they were largely irrelevant in the case of Yuan, who instead foregrounded his ethnic identity as a Dutch immigrant. Clearly, the accounts of these two participants represent very different *kinds* of response to this episode, since they object to it on fundamentally *different* grounds. That many such examples were found in relation to the present study attests to the need to recognise differences *within*, as well as between, members of different demographic and social groups.

Changing Our Perceptions Around 'Motherhood' and 'The Family'?

In terms of the wider ramifications of these findings, it is clear that American entertainment television can play an active and constitutive role in that on-going cultural process whereby our understandings, assumptions and beliefs about 'motherhood' and 'the family' are continually being forged, reproduced, challenged and sometimes changed. While that role does not consist of *determining* the nature and content of audience receptions, it *does* entail presenting a particular version of reality, and affirming a particular world view. It also entails 'setting the agenda' for viewers' discussions of these and other issues, in terms of defining how those issues should be understood and talked about. These capacities suggest that texts such as *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* are deeply implicated in a much wider struggle to define 'the meaning of things' and win consent to a particular discursive 'regime of truth'.

As a 'productive network' in its own right, this particular episode can be seen in some cases to have shaped and informed participants' constructions of meanings around 'motherhood' and 'the family'. There is evidence, for example, to suggest that the perceptions of some participants were altered by certain aspects of the version of reality depicted in this episode. Robyn, for example, appears to revise his existing understanding of the maternal instinct in light of the textual information that motherhood was clearly not coming 'naturally' to Murphy Brown:

> *What do you think about this idea of there being a maternal instinct?*
> Being a male I suppose it's expected that these maternal instincts are going to be there when the baby turns up, *but...it showed on the programme that [they]*

> *didn't*.... [J]ust the way she held the baby and didn't want to bring it close and [doing] everything by the book (laughs)...and having to do a course in breastfeeding, *so maybe...in some circumstances it's not there and we take it for granted.* (Robyn; emphasis added)

Robyn thus appears to realign his own viewpoint to match the 'regime of truth' implicit in this episode, which effectively disrupts the notion that there is a maternal instinct in favour of the view that parenting is a learned social activity. Similarly, this episode appears to have reintroduced Kimi to the possibility that not every mother has an innate understanding of how to care for their children:

> *Has this episode influenced the way that you think about motherhood at all?*
> In a way it's made me wonder, are there really people out there that don't know how to hold a baby? Are there really...truly people out there who have to learn everything from a book? And I'm just thinking, wow, *maybe there <u>are</u> some mothers like that* and that's something I've never ever considered....except for once, at work...where the mum gave the baby up. [I]t was the ideal family. She was very well off...career-oriented, had a husband, I think, and just didn't know how to be a mum, didn't know how to wind her baby, couldn't handle it, [and] gave the baby up.... [S]o in that respect, I've come across someone like that. That's...one part about it that's sort of new to me. (Kimi; emphasis added)

Significantly, the textual depiction of Murphy as an 'unmaternal' mother evidently prompts Kimi to reconsider her past encounter with a similarly 'unmaternal' mum, and to partially revise her initial reading of Murphy's struggle as extremely unrealistic - "maybe there *are* some mothers like that". These examples, of which I could cite many, demonstrate that when the version of reality depicted in television programmes is perceived as inconsistent with viewers' own understandings of the world, they may at times alter their own understandings to accommodate that new representation.

There is also considerable evidence to suggest that Murphy's response to Dan Quayle in Scene 14 was a particularly effective rhetorical strategy in terms of securing viewers (at times negotiated) consent to a liberal-humanist redefinition of the family on the basis of affective relations rather than structural ones. Murphy's speech was received very positively by the vast majority of participants, including some of those who at other moments articulated views on the family that were at variance with the discursive position it explicitly affirms. In the following exchange, for example, David offers a preferred evaluation of the propositional content of this episode concerning 'the

family', and clearly accepts its definition of 'the issue' as that of the *quality* of family relations, as opposed to the presence or absence of the father:

> And then she finally got to work and she gave a really good speech and she showed all the people across the nation that there's about a million or so families that are not two-parent families and that's okay, or that's normal was the message she was trying to say. And that the main ingredient was caring, tenderness and love. I know she said three things - caring, something and love. And that was the point...whether [there are] two parents or not.
> *So what do you think about the message that she put across there? The idea that families are defined by caring...*
> Yeah. What are those three points she said?
> *Caring, commitment and love.*
> Caring, commitment and love. Yeah. Very good. Got to be good for you. Mm. (David)

However, it is clear that this definition of the agenda for debate was not entirely consistent with David's existing belief that the nuclear family actually comprises the *ideal* form of family organisation, a view he expressed on several occasions, including immediately following the above exchange:

> *Were there any parts in particular during the programme that really stuck in your mind?*
> I was just going along with it and thinking you know, there's two sides to the story. Like there was her side and then there's Dan Quayle's. And...he probably had some points but he probably wasn't going about it very well...not very diplomatically anyway. And...like I said before at the beginning, *ideally it probably is better...to have a mother and a father.* (David)

The point here is that David reconciles this inconsistency between the propositional content of this episode and his existing views by effectively *changing* his own understanding of this issue to fit with the agenda *set by the text itself*, a move which he himself acknowledged at the conclusion of this interview:

> *Do you think this programme has influenced the way that you think about motherhood at all?*
> Yes. Like the main thing *is* caring, commitment and love. (David)

Clearly, this textual rhetoric was 'successful' in David's case in terms of persuading him, even if only momentarily, to accept this episode's implicit 'regime of truth' *as opposed to* that supplied by the oppositional discourse of the moral right, accessible to David through his religious group memberships. In a few cases, however, the depicted reality and liberal rhetoric presented in *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* had precisely the *opposite* effect of reinforcing and even entrenching participants' existing views, as suggested by the following response offered by Courtney:

> *Do you think this episode has influenced the way that you think about motherhood at all?*
> Ah, it only strengthens what I already believe.
> *How does that happen?*
> Because I see what is portrayed as less than ideal and it makes me all the more keen to support things that *are* the ideal. (Courtney)

Conclusion

To offer some tentative conclusions at this point, identification with Murphy Brown as the central narrative protagonist was a significant aspect of the process whereby the participants in this study made sense of *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato,* including its "related prescriptions for action...and persuasion of what is the case" (Wilson, 1996, p. 12). Such identifications were clearly differentiated at the level of social group membership(s). Potential sources of recognition were often grounded in participants' group memberships as 'parent' or 'mother'. It was noted, however, that these same memberships could also facilitate participants' sense of estrangement on the basis of a perceived 'lack of fit' between their own experience of life and that of Murphy as the central narrative protagonist. Other demographic and social group memberships, such as occupation, generation or socioeconomic class could similarly provide alternative sources of either identification or estrangement. The findings of this study therefore suggest that identification is *linked* to social group membership(s), but not in any mechanical or (pre)deterministic way. This reflects viewers' multiple and shifting subject positionings, which intersect to shape receptions that bear the *traces* of particular demographic, social and cultural group memberships that others may share, but which remain uniquely articulated at the level of individual biography.

Viewer identification was also found to bear a close relationship to the modes of reception adopted by the participants in this study; modes which in turn framed participants' receptions of the discursive content of *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* around 'motherhood', the family' and *Murphy Brown.* The adoption of a transparent mode, for example, was shown to facilitate viewers' acceptance of the propositional

content and agenda of this episode, due to its reliance on information and interpretive frameworks supplied within the text itself. A referential mode, on the other hand, entailed a more socially-grounded and interactive process whereby participants' drew from extra-textual sources of information in a way which allowed them to confirm or contradict the accuracy of the textual depiction of reality, according to its fit or lack of fit with their own experience of life and the world around them. These sources of referential information were often linked to participants' social group memberships, and at times provided participants with a means of resisting this episode's agenda and discursive content.

Differently again, the adoption of a mediated mode of reception at times appeared to mitigate against participants' acceptance of privileged textual attributions, since it focused attention on features relating to textual *production* as opposed to the 'realistic' life world of the narrative itself. Since viewers in this mode were typically somewhat removed from the text, they were less involved in the story, less inclined to identify with Murphy as the central narrative protagonist, and hence potentially less receptive to its 'prescriptions for action' or discursive content. However, resistance to that content by viewers in this mode was typically based on a heightened attunement to matters relating to textual *form* or aesthetics, rather than matters relating to this episode's discursive or narrative *content*, as was the case when participants adopted a rhetorical mode of reception. At such moments, cultural location and social group membership(s) provided access to extra-textual discourses of the wider social world which were activated in ways which affirmed, negotiated or opposed the various 'messages' around motherhood and the family articulated in this episode. Much less frequently, social group memberships and related discursive repertoires enabled some participants to read 'against the grain' of *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* and to redefine the agenda for its interpretation and discussion in significantly different terms.

As this discussion suggests, different modes of reception frame the *content* of audience receptions in discernible and highly significant ways, and similarly impact upon the ability of television programmes to secure a 'preferred' reading of their discursive content at the point of reception. For this reason, understanding how differently positioned viewers receive and make sense of television texts comprises an essential first step in discerning the role of American entertainment television in the social construction of 'motherhood' and 'the family' in New Zealand today.

VIII

Conclusion

The findings of this tri-partite investigation suggest that American television texts such as *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* are active participants in the social construction of 'motherhood' and 'the family' in New Zealand today. While generally dismissed as relatively 'innocent' entertainment, such programmes remain intimately involved in an on-going social process whereby 'the meaning of things' is determined, contested and re-negotiated within the context of a much wider struggle to win public consent to a particular discursive 'regime of truth'. The research presented here demonstrates that, as a productive network in its own right, this particular sitcom episode was relatively effective in securing participants' acquiescence to its privileged liberal-humanist concepts, statements and themes around 'motherhood' and 'the family'. But while this episode was clearly able to define how these issues were understood and talked about by many of the participants in this study, a number of factors impeded its capacity to delimit the parameters of reception for viewers here in New Zealand.

Firstly, the process of reception itself has been demonstrated to be an inherently active, selective, social, creative and at times critical process. Participants were frequently able to draw on interpretive resources other than the information or 'clues' supplied within the text itself, and clearly brought different personal experiences, cultural knowledges and discursive repertoires to their individual encounters with this American sitcom text. Participants were also found to approach the process of meaning production itself in different ways, in accordance with their simultaneous or consecutive adoption of different *modes* of reception. These modes were shown to reflect varying levels of involvement in this particular television programme, along with different degrees of attunement to its textual form, narrative and discursive content. Furthermore, the adoption of different modes of reception was shown to impinge on the potential 'effectivity' of this television text in terms of its attempt to frame receptions in a particular way and secure viewers' consent to the 'regime of truth' implicit in its discursive content around 'motherhood' and 'the family'.

These issues were usefully explored in relation to the role of national and cultural differences in shaping New Zealanders' receptions of this American sitcom text. It was found that in certain cases, a clash between the aesthetic values implicit within this

episode and those upheld by some of the participants in this study prompted their adoption of a mediated mode of reception. Furthermore, adoption of this mode at times interrupted participants' engagement with the narrative and discursive content of this episode. In some instances, this appeared to counteract the potential of such programming to play a significant role in discursive struggles around 'motherhood' and 'the family' in New Zealand today, since texts of this genre were conceived as irrelevant to the process of 'serious' debate and were consequently dismissed as meaningless 'rubbish'.

It was also found that cultural differences were at times foregrounded by those participants who perceived a distinct 'lack of fit' between the reality depicted in *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* and their own experience of life in New Zealand. These participants expressed a sense of estrangement from this American sitcom episode which interrupted their identification with Murphy Brown as the central narrative protagonist, in turn generating a tendency for some viewers to distance themselves from this programme's manifest discursive content. For these participants, the role of this television production in the social construction of 'motherhood' and 'the family' in New Zealand was constrained by a heightened perception of its depicted reality as culturally *alien.* In the process, this episode's privileged discursive voice was rendered somewhat less relevant to debates around 'motherhood' and 'the family' in this country than were more familiar local utterances.

More frequently however, cultural and national differences were effectively transcended by those participants who recognised familiar or universal elements in this foreign television production. The New Zealanders in this study drew on various extra-textual elements in identifying parallels between the reality depicted in *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* and features of their own culturally-located knowledge and experience. By 'bringing meaning back home', these participants effectively ascribed *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* a role in the social construction of 'motherhood' and 'the family' in New Zealand today. That is to say, their readings repositioned this foreign text as a locally relevant voice in the bid to fix the meanings of these objects of discourse. Consequently, this American sitcom episode came to inform their own discursive management of these ongoing debates within this different geo-political context.

While seeing much that was familiar in this American television text, the participants in this study also encountered numerous culturally-specific references to the wider political context of this episode's production in the United States in 1992. Faced with associated gaps in their understanding, participants adopted a number of different

strategies for meaning production. Some assumed a transparent mode of reception and relied on information supplied within the episode itself for possible 'clues' as to the meaning of indeterminate textual elements. For example, many had no alternative sources of knowledge with which to contextualise Dan Quayle's controversial remarks, and consequently relied on the available textual 'evidence' that Quayle was a very conservative politician with outdated views, whose unwarranted attack on a single mother struggling to cope was *said* to be diverting attention away from the real issues. In relying on textual clues in this way, these participants effectively allowed this episode to define the terms of its own interpretation and to frame their understanding in a particular way. It was suggested that this capacity may be more pronounced in the case of cross-cultural reception, due to the lack of relevant contextual knowledge with which to contest the available information and the implicit agenda governing its presentation of 'motherhood' and 'the family'.

Other participants tried to fill these blank and blurry patches by drawing on the pool of knowledge and experience they possessed as insiders of this different cultural context, and effectively 'read' this text in relation to how 'motherhood' and 'the family' are debated in New Zealand. In this way, they were able to make sense of 'indeterminate' images and events in relation to their own geo-political location. Such readings effectively *indigenised* this American sitcom episode, giving it a local accent and permitting the creation of more locally-relevant meanings of it. At times, these new meanings interrupted and undermined the agenda set by this text, along with its privileged textual meanings. At other indeterminate moments, fertile conditions appeared to exist for the production of divergent, unpredictable and often quite creative readings, as demonstrated by participants' unique interpretations of this episode's concluding 'potatoe' joke.

This study also considered the role of demographic and social group memberships in shaping the receptions of differently positioned viewers, and in providing a potential counterpoint to the agenda-setting ability of *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato*. It was found that differences in age, gender, socioeconomic class, political and religious belief were at times transcended by those participants who perceived Murphy's situation as in some way resembling their own experiences as parents or mothers, or who regarded her political perspective and 'activism' as comparable with their own. However, for other participants these same memberships could provide grounds for a perceived 'lack of fit' between their own experience of life and that depicted in this episode, thereby facilitating a sense of estrangement from Murphy as the central narrative protagonist. Alternative sources of identification and estrangement were

based on experiences related to demographic and social group membership(s) such as occupation, generation, and socioeconomic class.

Viewer identifications with Murphy were also found to be closely related to the adoption of particular modes of reception, which in turn framed participants' understandings and evaluations of this episode's discursive content around 'motherhood' and 'the family'. The adoption of a transparent mode, for example, was again shown to facilitate acceptance of the privileged discursive content and agenda of this episode, whereas a referential mode entailed a more socially-grounded and interactive process in which participants confirmed or contradicted the accuracy of the textual depiction of reality, according to its fit, or lack of fit, with their own experience of life and the world around them. Such referential information was often supplied by participants' social group memberships, and in some cases provided a means of resisting this episode's agenda and discursive content around 'motherhood', 'the family' and *Murphy Brown.*

Similarly, the adoption of a mediated mode of reception at times appeared to mitigate against participants' acceptance of privileged textual attributions, since it diverted attention away from the 'realistic' life world of the narrative and instead highlighted features relating to textual production and aesthetics. Viewers in this mode assumed a notably distanced stance in relation to the narrative content of this episode, and were less inclined to identify with Murphy as the central narrative protagonist. They were consequently less receptive to its 'prescriptions for action' or privileged discursive content, in the sense of being unwilling to engage with them. However, since this response was based on a heightened attunement to matters relating to textual *form*, it was argued that readings of this nature remain qualitatively different to those which express a discursively-grounded objection to the propositional content of any given television production. Indeed, the findings of this study reveal that the adoption of a mediated mode of reception does not preclude viewers' preferred evaluations of that content. This demonstrates that while viewers often assume a primary mode of reception, they remain able to commute between all four modes of response. It is thus possible for viewers to 'read' fictional television narratives on various levels consecutively - and at times simultaneously - 'as *life*', 'as *like* life', 'as a *production*', or 'as a *message*'.

When adopting a rhetorical mode of reception and responding to this episode 'as a message', differently positioned participants were found to draw on various alternative discourses circulating within their own cultural location, and in some cases this enabled participants to effectively shift the agenda for debate. Access to child-centred

discourse, for example, enabled some participants to raise the potentially complicating issue of the rights, needs and interests of young children, an issue which is not addressed in this episode. Participants were also found to be able to articulate these discourses in ways which affirmed, negotiated or opposed this episode's various 'messages' around 'motherhood' and 'the family', although few read entirely 'against the grain' of this text and made sense of it on their own, very different terms. Furthermore, while these alternative discourses were shown to form part of the shared 'pool' of interpretive repertoires in general circulation within the macro context of reception, some were more immediately accessible to certain participants as a result of their unique array of social group memberships.

The findings of this study therefore suggest that viewer identifications, modes of reception and access to discourse are all *linked* to social group membership, but not in any mechanical or predetermined way. Rather, viewers' multiple and shifting subject positionings can be understood as intersecting to shape receptions that bear the *traces* of particular demographic, social and cultural group memberships, but which remain uniquely articulated at an individual level. I thus concur with the view of Corner (1995), who suggests that the receptions viewers make of television programmes are *situated,* yet remain both *socially* and *personally* contingent. Corner proposes that meanings are socially contingent in that differently positioned viewers produce qualitatively different readings *because* their experiences are made sense of within social contexts; contexts that are often specific to particular demographic or social group memberships. Meanings are also personally contingent in the sense that sharing a common social location or group membership does not produce identical experiences; nor does it mean that these are felt or understood in the same way. That is to say, viewers may share similar *sets* of experiences particular to their social location or group membership, but these experiences remain personally relevant and specific to their individual biography (Corner, 1995).

On the basis of these findings, it is clear that American entertainment television can play an active and constitutive role in reproducing, challenging and sometimes changing our understandings, assumptions and beliefs around 'motherhood' and 'the family'. While television texts such as *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* do not *determine* the nature and content of audience receptions, they do present a particular version of reality, and affirm a particular world view. They also 'set the agenda' for viewers' discussions of the issues they raise, in terms of defining how issues such as 'motherhood' and 'the family' should be understood and talked about. Such texts are thus deeply implicated in a much wider struggle to define the social meaning of these objects of discourse and to win consent to a particular 'regime of truth'.

The 'regime of truth' upheld in this episode - and also, according to Medved (1992), in the vast majority of American entertainment television - is that affirmed by liberal-humanist discourse. Clearly, *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato's* explicit privileging of liberal-humanist discourse constitutes something of a reaction against the conservative morality underpinning Quayle's attack on this series. In the process of debunking his assertions, however, this episode depicts a highly problematic version of contemporary motherhood. In the constructed reality of this American sitcom, Murphy soldiers on alone trying to cope with the demands of a new baby, does not want and/or cannot afford to take more than a few days off work, and consequently must attempt to employ a private caregiver - a nanny - at her own expense. Yet within the narrative and discursive content of this episode, Murphy's ability to reconcile these competing demands is affirmed as the text asserts a liberal-feminist affirmation of working motherhood alongside a liberal-humanist affirmation of single parenthood. In the process, the carefully contrived 'happy ending' of *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato* serves to obscure the rather less cheerful contemporary reality of many working mothers in New Zealand today.

Within this contemporary context, I would argue, motherhood is becoming increasingly incompatible with women's full participation in the public realm. Anecdotal evidence suggests that for many New Zealand women, negotiating between working and family life is a process fraught with difficulties (Stewart & Davis, 1996). This process is likely made even harder given the current environment of a highly competitive labour market in tandem with decreased social support for new and working mothers. The latter is epitomised by a decline in the length of hospitalisation following childbirth, the degradation of early childhood services such as Karitane and Plunket, cuts to early childcare subsidies for welfare beneficiaries, and the continued absence of paid parental leave (State Services Commission, 1985; Ministry of Women's Affairs, 1995). Indeed, parents (and more particularly, *mothers*) are often penalised for taking 'time out' for childbearing and rearing. Women are still regularly dismissed from their jobs for taking the fifty-four weeks unpaid maternity leave that is their legal right, and many women justifiably fear that their position will be filled in their absence (Coney, 1993; Kedgley, 1996). Adding to this, women continue to assume most of the responsibility for unpaid domestic labour and childcare, despite their increased participation in paid employment (Department of Statistics, 1991b; Ministry of Women's Affairs, 1995). The combination of these factors renders it difficult for many women to reconcile motherhood with full-time employment.

To a large extent, these difficulties have been further compounded during the 1990s by the solidification of the discourse of the economic new right within New Zealand's

political and economic spheres, typified in the overriding imperatives of cutting back the State and increasing the 'responsibility' of individuals for bearing the cost of their more 'irrational' life choices, such as bearing and rearing children (Middleton, 1990). Given the extent to which these material effects have been exacerbated (if not caused directly) by the local ascendancy of this discourse, one might be excused for thinking that the discursive articulations of American entertainment television pale into relative insignificance. I would argue, however, that the dominance of liberal-humanist discourse within a large proportion of television programming in this country does have major implications for discursive struggles around 'motherhood' and 'the family' in New Zealand today.

Not only does liberal-humanist discourse mask the contemporary realities outlined above, but, like the discourse of the economic new right, it fails to acknowledge the historical division of labour that places most of the responsibility for juggling work and family responsibilities on the shoulders of individual women. Thus, while liberal-humanist discourse affirms the right of all women, including mothers, to work if they so desire, in practice this freedom 'entitles' women to work a 'double shift' of paid employment *in addition to* their usual domestic labour and childcare responsibilities. Similarly, while liberal-humanist discourse affirms the right of women to raise a child alone if they so choose, it does so at a time when New Zealand government is becoming increasingly reluctant to support them and their children financially if that is their life 'choice'. The problem here is that neither liberal-humanist discourse nor the discourse of the economic new right challenge the traditional assumption that women bear the major responsibility for human reproduction and domestic labour. Because of this, liberal-humanism as articulated within American entertainment television works to bolster the dominant discourse within New Zealand's political and economic realm and offers no real means of critiquing it.

Furthermore, the comparative dominance of liberal-humanist discourse within such a key medium as television may serve to drown out other alternative visions of 'motherhood' and 'the family'. Voices which might speak of a different mode of social organisation - such as one in which there could be a social or collective responsibility for child care and rearing - are potentially marginalised. In the meantime, American entertainment television continues to affirm a somewhat optimistic liberal-humanist vision of gender equality, an equality that cannot be achieved without concrete social changes that would give women the freedom to choose without incurring undue personal and economic cost.

On a rather more positive note, this research makes a substantial contribution to knowledge in the fields of Women's Studies and audience reception research. In relation to the social construction of 'motherhood' and 'the family' that is primarily the preserve of Women's Studies, this research clarifies the terrain of this discursive struggle within this geo-political context during the mid 1990s. It illustrates how these important local debates are articulated in this country, along with how they are informed by external influences such as 'foreign' media. This study also demonstrates that the construction of 'motherhood' and 'the family' in contemporary New Zealand is an ongoing process of reproduction, renegotiation and change, and offers insight into how that process takes place within a multitude of interrelated discursive sites - including politics, economics, education, religion, and the media - as well as at the micro level of individual articulation. The role that American entertainment television can play in informing and defining that field is similarly revealed, along with the ways in which individuals attempt to manage or reconcile incompatible discursive constructions of 'motherhood' and 'the family' in their talk and in their own lives.

In relation to the second area of investigation, this study makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of the nature and process of audience reception. It offers this field a comprehensive analytical schema of the different modes of audience reception that can be adopted by different viewers in making sense of a discrete television text. This schema draws together various insights derived from the existing body of knowledge concerning audience reception, and provides essential clarification of the different approaches that can be taken in the course of sense production - approaches which define both the form and content of individual receptions of television texts. By so doing, this schema potentially offers the necessary conceptual tools with which to perceive the areas of commonality that can and *should* be identified between the modes of reception adopted by different groups of research participants under very different conditions, in very different contexts, and in response to a range of television programming. In the process, this study shifts the focus of our attention away from the potentially infinite process of documenting the receptions of increasingly fractured viewing subjects to an increasingly diverse range of television production, to that of identifying and clarifying what is common and what is unique to receptions made by different individuals in various contexts and across a range of television programming. On the basis of this consolidation and clarification of what is known about the nature and process of audience reception, it may be possible to build a more sophisticated theoretical understanding of the link between audience reception, cultural location, social group membership and access to discourse.

Of course, additional research is needed to confirm the sufficiency and utility of the modes of reception identified here. Among the questions that need to be addressed are these: will the same modes of response be evident in relation to viewers' receptions of non-fictional programming, or of texts of other fictional genres? Will the same modes of reception be adopted by other groups of participants under different conditions? In order to answer such questions and confirm any general patterns in viewer interpretation and response, a substantially larger-scale investigation is needed. Such a project might combine qualitative and quantitative procedures, and should examine viewers' receptions of texts of different genres. It should also attempt to chart the distribution of different modes of reception among the viewing audience, and identify areas of relationship between modes of reception and viewers' social group memberships. Of central concern here is this question of whether particular social groups consistently adopt particular modes of reception, and in relation to which sorts of television programming?

Further research is also needed in terms of understanding how American entertainment television as a whole might contribute to discursive struggles around 'motherhood' and 'the family' in contemporary New Zealand society. Obviously, the vast array of American television programming broadcast in this country is comprised of a wide range of texts from genres other than sitcom, and only some of these genres engage at all with issues specifically related to 'motherhood' and 'the family', and even then perhaps only occasionally. Investigations in these areas may similarly benefit from the insights offered in this study regarding how New Zealand viewers *go about* making sense of 'foreign' texts. In this respect, the present research comprises an essential first step in discerning the social significance of American entertainment programming in the social construction of 'motherhood' and 'the family' in New Zealand today.

Notes

I: Introduction

1 These theorists commonly highlighted the relationship between women's reproductive capacity, their traditional responsibilities for child rearing and socialisation, and their apparently universal social subordination. De Beauvoir (1957, p. 55), for example, considered women to be victims of their biological "bondage" as reproducers of the species, while Firestone (1979, p. 192) proclaimed that "nature produced the fundamental inequality - half the human race must bear and rear the children of all of them - which was later consolidated, institutionalized, in the interests of men".

2 The rate of work force participation among mothers with children under one year of age increased from twenty-three percent in 1986 to twenty-seven percent in 1991. Among mothers with children between one and four years of age, the rate increased from forty-three percent to forty-five percent (Statistics New Zealand/Te Tari Tatau, 1994).

3 See chapter IV, pages 119-122 for discussion of this point. See also Morgan (1993), Foley (1994), Barber (1997), and Revell (1997).

4 National AGB:McNair figures for the week ending 23rd August 1997 indicate that local productions accounted for thirteen of the twenty highest-rating programmes broadcast in that week (*NZH* 28.8.97).

5 AGB:McNair figures for the same week indicate that sitcoms accounted for five of the six American productions which ranked in the top twenty in Auckland, New Zealand's largest metropolitan region (*NZH* 28.8.97).

6 This episode was broadcast in New Zealand under the title *You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato*. In this thesis, I refer to the episode's original name in chapters I, II, III and IV, but use its New Zealand name in subsequent chapters referring to local receptions of this text. In effect, this name change provides a neat illustration of just one of the ways in which textual meaning can be reconfigured in the shift between cultures.

7 This 'blurring of the line' between reality and fantasy is nothing particularly new for this series, as Walkowitz (1993) notes. Creator and producer Diane English concedes that several episodes relating to Murphy's pregnancy drew from the experiences and struggles of 'real life' newscasters such as Connie Chung and Liz Walker, both of whose pregnancies met with public criticism in the American national press (Walkowitz, 1993).

8 Initially, I thought that perhaps Dow was referring to regular viewers of this series. Yet if Murphy's depiction is as negative and recuperative as Dow claims, it struck me as somewhat strange that this series should rate most highly among tertiary-educated, higher socio-economic women and professionals (Mandese, 1992). This section of the viewing audience is, after all, that which Murphy most closely resembles, and these particular women are perhaps more likely than other viewers to engage in similarly 'transgressive' behaviour in the conduct of their professional lives. Given the extent to which their own entry into the public realm has been largely predicated on the discourse of liberal-feminism and its claim that women have the right and capacity to participate actively within this sphere, I also thought it somewhat peculiar that tertiary-educated and professional women would read this series as some kind of patriarchal meta-critique of the excesses of liberal-feminism and yet remain loyal fans. This reading also seemed out of step with (admittedly casual) conversations I had previously had with professional women, several of whom claimed to be big fans of this series. Their sentiments were not unlike that of a woman participating in this study - a mature graduate student actively involved in left-wing politics - who made this glowing assessment of Murphy:

> I love Murphy Brown, I love the way she's a role model for young women to be like her if that's what they want. To me she's sophisticated and she is witty and she's everything that I would really like to be, if I had the chance again! (Maeve)

Apparently oblivious to such inconsistencies, Dow seems to perceive no need to investigate the way in which real audience members actually understand this series and the depiction of its central character.

II: Theoretical and Methodological Framework

1 Foucault's archaeological method approaches the analysis of historical modes of discourse as though discourses were pure and autonomous semantic systems. Perhaps best exemplified in *The Order of Things* (1970), this method represents an

attempt to identify (via an entirely *internal* analysis) the range of possible statements that a particular discursive formation can produce, along with those things that cannot be said. In either event, both the production and limitation of statements is viewed as unmotivated, as opposed to politically interested (Sheridan, 1980; Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982; Shumway, 1992).

2 In contrast to the ahistoricism of the archaeological method, genealogy reflects Foucault's latter recognition that all truth claims are constructed from a particular perspective, and furthermore, remain implicated in wider relations of power. Genealogy thus attempts to discover the *external* conditions governing particular discursive practices - for example, those institutional provisions which determine who has the right and authority to speak, and when. These provisions are viewed, not as an effect of discourse itself, but rather as a function of the role played by discourse in reproducing particular relations of social, political and economic power within society itself. Genealogies such as *Discipline and Punish* (1977) therefore seek to demonstrate that certain social groups benefit from particular discursive changes, and that these shifts which work in tandem with the dominant hegemony. On these grounds control over discourse is conceived as essential to the functioning of power (Sheridan, 1980; Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982; Shumway, 1992).

3 This is not to say, however, that nothing exists outside the realm of the discursive - Foucault himself identifies a number of non-discursive practices, including institutions, political events, economic and social processes (Sheridan, 1980). Hall also seeks to qualify the scope of the discursive, arguing that

> events, relations, structures do have conditions of existence and real effects, outside the sphere of the discursive; but...only within the discursive, and subject to its specific conditions, limits and modalities, do they have or can they be constructed within meaning.... [H]ow things are represented and the 'machineries' and regimes of representation in a culture do play a constitutive, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event, role. (Hall, 1988d, cited in Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p. 63)

4 For Gramsci, this consent is negotiated and won, not through the forceful suppression of marginal or even oppositional voices and ideals, but through their incorporation - by taking some of the interests and values of subordinated groups seriously and then re-negotiating, accommodating and re-articulating these interests and values through the dominant culture and ideology.

5 The reader should note that the use of the term 'articulation' in this thesis is intended to refer quite simply to the enunciation of certain discursive propositions. This is a somewhat different meaning to that proposed by Hall (1996), who defines an articulation as

> a connection or link which is not necessarily given in all cases, as a law or as a fact of life, but which requires particular conditions of existence to appear at all, which has to be positively sustained by specific processes, which is not 'eternal' but has constantly to be renewed, which can under some circumstances disappear or be overthrown, leading to the old linkages being dissolved and new connections - rearticulations - being forged. (Hall, 1996, p. 33)

6 In their study of "*political discourse: talking about nationalization and privatization*", these authors demonstrate that the two main discursive repertoires utilised in participants' discussions ('efficiency' and 'social justice') were "not exclusive to any particular political viewpoint" (Marshall & Raabe, 1993, p. 38). That is to say, neither 'conservatives' nor 'liberals' gave unconditional support for either privatisation or nationalisation, a finding which renders problematic the assumption (frequently made by audience researchers) that individuals can be placed exclusively into one demographic, social or in this case, political category. Rather, these competing discursive frameworks were used in different ways by different participants, and allowed them to either "rationalize or disclaim privatization or nationalization, depending upon the context" (Ibid.). In one account, for example, the concept of 'efficiency' was initially introduced to support privatisation, but was later used to negate it, before finally being articulated in support of nationalisation (Ibid., p. 40). In light of such findings, these authors suggest that

> [P]articipants do not hold consistently onto their notions of privatization and nationalization at all costs. Participants from both groups accept or reject both notions, depending on the context in which they are placed. *They dip in and out of the available discourses in order to make sense of the issues at hand.* (Ibid., p. 48; emphasis added)

7 They argued, for example, that classic filmic techniques such as the point-of-view shot and shot-reverse shot sequence were 'suturing' devices which encouraged audience involvement and identification (Moores, 1990; Curran, 1996b). Furthermore, they claimed that the use of such techniques worked to affirm the dominant ideological fiction that human subjects are discrete, autonomous, and self-directed individuals. According to feminist theorists such as Laura Mulvey (1975), Hollywood film

narratives also typically presumed a *masculine* subject and thus constructed women as the objects of male gaze.

8 The analyst, on the other hand, was presumed to stand outside this relation of domination in the pure space of 'true' consciousness. Effectively, then, these analysts preserved their own sense of interpretative agency while denying the autonomy of 'the masses', thus precluding the very possibility that viewers might rework or even resist the variously defined ideological messages of cultural texts (Radway, 1984). In this way, the very possibility that viewers might consciously resist the ideological distortions of cultural texts and at some level negotiate their meaning and the terms of their own subjectivity was effectively marginalised (Ang, 1989a). Underpinning this thesis was a troubling presumption that the micro context of individual viewing remained subordinate to the all-pervasive and largely unchanging symbolic, psychic, and material structures of subject formation which such texts inevitably worked to reproduce (Ibid.).

9 While Radway's study of the social meaning of popular romance novels such as *Harlequin* and *Mills & Boon* to their female fans is now a classic in the tradition of ethnographic studies of the audience, it is not included in this discussion because I felt it more pertinent to focus on those studies which relate more specifically to the reception of television in this section.

10 Stuart Hall (1980b), David Morley (1989) and Robert Allen (1992b) develop this idea further in reiterating the structuralist insight that since meaningful communication is partially dependent on the operation of *social* frameworks, codes and conventions, the range of meanings that can be made from cultural productions is limited by the extent to which viewers share the terms of reference, or cultural categories, of cultural producers. In these terms, North American cultural producers can be understood as being intimately involved in re-articulating and transmitting the discursive systems of thought and belief - the cultural categories - which organise interpretation and behaviour for members of the Western Symbolic Order (Cantor, 1987; Curran & Sparks, 1991), and, in an age marked by the global dominance of American cultural production, increasingly for members of those groups historically exiled to the margins of Western society also.

11 The first stage of this project involved a semiotic analysis of two editions of the early evening British news programme *Nationwide*, designed to establish the preferred meanings and structural constraints on meaning present within the texts themselves (Brunsdon & Morley, 1978). In the second stage, Morley examined the

degree to which 29 different groups of viewers accepted, negotiated and at times resisted or rejected *Nationwide*'s preferred reading of events and issues. He subsequently classified their different decodings in order to establish

> [H]ow the different subcultural structures and formations within the audience, and the sharing of different cultural codes and competencies amongst different groups and classes, structure the decoding of the message for different sections of the audience. (Morley, 1980b, p. 51)

Through this process, Morley identified a range of responses which exposed the limitations of both Hall's encoding/decoding model and its implicit reliance on homogenising notions of class stratification. For example, Morley initially grouped the bank managers and print management trainees together on the presumption that they would make similar readings because both groups were predominantly middle-class, male and white. Morley found, however, that while *Nationwide* was regarded as largely non-controversial by the bank managers, who seemed to share its 'common-sense' discourse, the print trainees upheld a free-market version of radical conservative discourse and consequently perceived this programme as espousing a 'socialist' bias against management.

12 While Morley's study has been extremely influential in the development of this strand of audience-based Cultural Studies, it has also been subject to intense criticism for its problematic assumption that *Nationwide* would be decoded in accordance with Hall's schema of preferred, negotiated or opposition readings. As Nightingale argues, this assumption "failed to anticipate the breadth of the discursive agenda addressed by either the programme or its viewers" (Nightingale, 1996, p. 68):

> [Morley's] audience interviews...showed people swinging from radicalism to conservatism, doggedly insisting on the veracity of personal judgements, and at times being unrepentantly self-contradictory, depending on the issue being discussed, but Morley interpreted such variability as resistance - as a permanent personal, class-based position rather than as a teetering high wire performance.... Instead of focusing on such acts of balancing and juggling as the purpose of his audience research, Morley sacrificed its potential as an exploration of the variability of interpretation to a demographic vision of class determination and sociological classification. (Ibid., p. 66)

Moores (1990) also argues that Morley's approach offered no real means of accounting for viewing pleasure. Finally, Morley himself notes that this study was limited by its

failure to address the significance of viewing context: the *Nationwide* study was, after all, conducted within the participants' workplaces or classrooms, a very different environment to the domestic context of home and family life within which most television viewing actually takes place. This issue was later addressed by Morley (1986) in his study of *Family Television.*

13 Many of these studies have adopted a comparative approach, examining both media texts and receptions of them among different audience members in an attempt to understand how particular genres and discursive themes are "assimilated" at the point of reception (Jensen & Rosengren, 1990, p. 214). Generally small-scale and qualitative in design, these studies frequently involve the in-depth interviewing of participants individually or more typically, in small groups.

14 As discussed by Newbold (1995a), this notion of agenda-setting goes back to the early work of McCombs and Shaw, who first expressed concern about the power of the news media to define issues and meanings within the public sphere. More recently, the role of news media in framing public understandings of key issues has been of central concern to the Glasgow University Media Group, and in particular Philo (1990, 1993), Miller (1994) and Kitzinger (1993). The contribution of these studies to the present investigation is outlined in chapter V.

15 The reader may perceive my use of a structuralist mode of textual analysis as inconsistent with the poststructuralist framework underpinning the present investigation. However, I would argue that structural analysis remains a useful (although by no means *sufficient*) method of analysing television sitcom in particular, since such programmes are typically (and often very consciously) constructed according to a set of generic conventions regarding the stages of narrative development that are followed and the pace at which the story unfolds (Cook, 1982; Curtis, 1982; Fiske, 1987; Palmer, 1987; Ellis, 1992). Hence, most sitcom narratives will indeed follow essentially the same structure. As I see it, the critical insight offered by poststructuralist theory - one which continues to underpin the present investigation - is that while the presence of such internal structuration should be acknowledged, it should *not* be presumed to have a determinate effect at the level of reception. Furthermore, the inevitable presence of alternative discourses within the text itself potentially operates to destabilise and undercut any attempt to secure the 'last word of the text' for viewers. For this reason, I have used structural analysis in conjunction with a mode of discourse analysis which seeks to acknowledge the possibility that viewers might read differently. The tripartite approach taken in this study and its focus on audience receptions also reflects an explicit acknowledgement that viewers remain

able to make sense of television texts in ways that cannot be predicted on the basis of a purely internalised structural analysis.

16 I felt it unnecessary to watch every single programme, as the primary intention of this phase of analysis was to identify the *dominant* discourses available within the wider macro sphere of reception, and these would logically be articulated on a regular basis.

17 In the case of those researchers following the tradition of Stuart Hall and David Morley, this trend evidently reflects an underlying assumption of the centrality of class struggle, and may also reflect a perception that working with social groups is a sound and practical option for reception research, since it permits the involvement of many participants, but costs less and is not as time-consuming as working with individuals (Burgess, Harrison & Maiteny, 1991). Some scholars regard focus group research as enabling some degree of replication of the sorts of social settings in which people watch and talk about television programmes they have recently seen, such as at home or at work (Liebes & Katz, 1990; Livingstone, 1990; Lunt, 1996). Group work is thus often regarded as a particularly useful method for studying the ways in which people's interpretations of television texts are collectively constructed during the course of their everyday social interactions with family members, friends, workmates, neighbours and so forth (see also Morley, 1980a; Richardson & Corner, 1986). Because of this, those reception researchers who employ the social group as their unit of investigation generally perceive this choice as most fully recognising the theoretical insight that meaning production is an active and intrinsically *social* process (Roscoe et al., 1995).

18 Focus group research is often problematic for several reasons. Firstly, the role of the moderator is a particularly demanding one, since it "requires him or her to monitor a complex social interaction, encourage contributions, and manage disruption, diversion, and other problematic group dynamics" (Lunt, 1996, p. 82). Secondly, transcription can be difficult at times, with the discussion shifting between a number of voices at different levels and at times interrupting each other (Bertrand, Brown & Ward, 1992, cited in Ibid.) Thirdly, a growing number of researchers have found that social dynamics tend to become amplified and indeed more intrusive when working with participants in groups. Höijer (1990), for example, notes that disagreement and dissent will typically be reduced as participants restrain from making dissenting opinions in group discussion. She suggests that individuals will tend to engage in 'image management' and limit what they are prepared to say in a public forum, particularly when other group members are not familiar to them. However as Lunt

(1996) points out, image management also occurs during individual interviews; the only real difference is that within this context, individuals have less people to manage their impression for. Hermes similarly found group interviews to be less productive than individual ones since participants "refrained from giving views they thought would be radically different from the views of the others and...they sometimes overdid statements they thought would make a good impression" (Hermes, 1993, cited in van Zoonen, 1994, p. 139). Van Zoonen (1994) also suggests that pre-existing groups may be structured (in advance of the conduct of research) by formal or informal power relations which make some participants feel uncomfortable and disinclined to express their real opinions.

Because of these sorts of dynamics, it can often be difficult to solicit the views of less forthcoming group members. It can also be difficult to stop some particularly confident participants from dominating the discussion. While good facilitation skills on the part of the research can manage these and other problems relatively effectively, there remains the danger that differences in opinion are being occluded because certain participants are more willing to articulate their views than others. This in turn may generate the impression that group members concur on an issue, when in fact less confident members feel unable to express disagreement with their more articulate and persuasive peers (Wren-Lewis, 1983; Curran, 1990; Höijer, 1990; Lewis, 1991; Schlesinger et al., 1992; MacGregor & Morrison, 1995). Philo (1990) provides fascinating insight into this 'normalising group effect' in his study of the role of the news media in setting the agenda for public discussion of the British miner's strike of 1984-5. In the course of a group discussion between residents of St Albans in Hertfordshire (a conservative south-east area), one woman said that the gun belonged to an 'outsider with the pickets'. When later interviewed alone, however, said she had thought it might have been a 'police plant'. Within the context of the research group, she had declined from expressing this opinion as she had assumed she would be alone in this view. Originally from a mining town in Lancashire, the woman said that she had been brought up 'Labour' and sympathised with them, but "didn't like to say so in St Albans" (Philo, 1990, p. 132). This example neatly illustrates the way in which the perception of a group consensus exerts considerable pressure on those who have different views to refrain from articulating their dissent, prompting this researcher to conduct individual as well as group interviews. Other researchers suggest that such incidents render group-based research ineffective:

> Comparing interpretations and opinions expressed individually with what is later said in group discussion, there are always several cases of diversion. In fact, too

> many to permit taking the group discussion as a valid basis for audiences' interpretations and reactions. (Höijer, 1990, p. 34)

Since these interpretations and reactions were of primary interest in this study, group discussion was not regarded as an entirely appropriate method of investigation.

III: Putting the Text in Context: *Murphy's Revenge* and America's "Culture War"

1 As noted by Smith (1995), many important policy statements by presidents, vice presidents, secretaries of state, members of Congress and other high-ranking officials have been delivered at the Commonwealth Club, which may go some way toward explaining the amount of media attention given to what was, in effect, merely a few lines out of Quayle's fairly broad-ranging speech.

2 This move seemed somewhat ironic to some given that Quayle's family owns a newspaper chain (Lewis & Morgan, 1996), and given also that he himself worked as the associate publisher of the *Huntington Herald-Press* before entering politics in 1976 (Fenno, 1989).

3 Former U.S. vice president Spiro Agnew, for example, was highly critical of the national news media's reporting during the Vietnam War (Ehrenreich, 1987; Smith, 1995), while William Bennett, Barbara and president George Bush have all publicly reproached *The Simpsons* (Martel, 1992; Benoit & Anderson, 1996). In response to the assertion of president Bush that Americans "need a nation closer to *The Waltons* than *The Simpsons*", Bart Simpson later replied "We're just like *The Waltons*. We're praying for the Depression to end, too" (Crotty, 1995, p. 13).

4 Given Quayle's assertion of the liberal bias in Hollywood, it is significant to note that in the wake of the controversy, Bergen featured on the cover of numerous women's and news magazines, received an honorary degree from the University of Pennsylvania, and won that year's Emmy award for best actress in a comedy series (Dafoe Whitehead, 1993).

5 A *Time*/CNN poll conducted in June 1992, for example, found that just sixteen percent of respondents felt Quayle's attack was completely justified, while forty-five percent felt it was completely *un*justified. A *Washington Post*/ABC poll conducted in July discovered that Quayle's unfavourable rating was at sixty-three

percent - the lowest ranking of any vice president in the history of modern polling (Gugliotta, 1992, cited in Smith, 1995). And while public opinion had become more temperate two months later, with a September *USA Today* poll finding that thirty-eight percent of Americans thought Quayle was right to champion family values, a larger group (forty-one percent) felt he had insulted single parents (Benoit & Anderson, 1996). More importantly perhaps from a political perspective, a *Los Angeles Times* poll printed early in September showed that the 'family values' ticket was turning many voters off (Nelson, 1992, cited in Smith, 1995). Clearly, the popularity of both Quayle and also Bush was damaged by Quayle's assault on Hollywood in general and *Murphy Brown* in particular, most notably among younger, better educated and more moderate Republicans. His call for a return to family values did, however, appear to consolidate the support of the New Christian Right (Smith 1995).

6 Indeed, this debate was very slow to die down completely. References to the original controversy can be found in news stories and academic papers published up to four years after the event. An article in a 1995 edition of *The Boston Phoenix* referred to this issue (Keough, 1995), and to date at least six academic papers have been published which address Quayle's criticisms of *Murphy Brown* and/or *Murphy's Revenge* as a textual response to them, in some form or another (Hartman, 1992; Moore, 1992; Walkowitz, 1993; Crotty, 1995; Smith, 1995; Benoit & Anderson, 1996).

7 In its contemporary form, this debate can be traced back to Carter's 1976 Presidential campaign and its assertion of a pluralistic definition of the family, in response to which discursive positions concerning the nature and structure of the American family became increasingly polarised (Peele, 1985; Hunter, 1991).

8 United States Department of Labour figures (*NZH: 18.3.95* Section 3, p. 8).

9 In confining my discussion to the discourses of liberal-humanism, the moral right, and communitarianism, it is not my intention to suggest that these were the *only* discourses available to the producers of this episode, but rather that these were very clearly the *dominant* voices shaping the wider social, political and cultural debate within which this episode is clearly situated.

10 As Frazer and Lacey (1993) argue, there is no such thing as *'the'* liberal discourse - 'liberalism' encompasses a range of positions and my discussion of the discourse of liberal-humanism is necessarily premised on my construction of an

idealised fictional version of 'liberal-humanist discourse' for the purposes of this analysis.

11 Proceeding from this anti-essentialist position, 'second wave' liberal-feminist activists have fought since the late 1960s for legal and social reforms designed to end discriminatory practices and facilitate women's equal participation and status within all levels of social and political life (Eisenstein, 1981; Bryson, 1992). Reframing motherhood as a social role which women may choose to engage in at some point in their lives, but which is not the primary source of their fulfilment as human beings, liberal-feminists also sought to recognise that women's traditional responsibility for childbearing and rearing often impeded their full participation in the public sphere (Jaggar & Rothenberg, 1984; Bryson, 1992; Frazer & Lacey, 1993). They consequently campaigned for better access to contraception, abortion, and childcare services, initiatives which reflected a perception that marriage and childbearing are often unrewarding, and that women should be free to join men in seeking personal autonomy, self-fulfilment and material reward through paid employment (Eisenstein, 1981; Frazer & Lacey, 1993).

12 As discussed by Ehrenreich (1987) and Hamamoto (1989), the growth of Evangelical or 'born-again' Christianity has largely offset the declining popularity of the more traditional religions in contemporary America.

13 The father's authority, also ordained by God, is held to comprise an essential disciplining force within the family which serves to reproduce the symbolic law and moral order (Gould, 1990). Psychoanalytic discourse is often drawn on to provide a quasi-scientific basis for the moral right's reification of the role of fathers; for example in this quote from Nicholas Davidson, author of an article entitled *Life without father: America's greatest social catastrophe*:

> The father is responsible for the formation of the "superego", or conscience. In this regard, the father's exercise of arbitrary authority is essential. The child learns to obey the father's orders not because the father is right or can explain his orders intelligibly, but simply because they are his orders. In other words, the child obeys his father because he must obey his father, not for any other reason. This experience is crucial. (Davidson, 1990, cited in Gould, 1990, p. 141)

14 Frazer and Lacey (1993, p. 110-111) note that what is commonly referred to as 'communitarianism' actually encompasses a range of different positions, including "constitutive", "sentimental", "instrumental" and "value" communitarianism.

15 For example, she reports the findings of a 1988 survey by the National Center for Health Statistics which found that children of single-parent families are significantly more likely to have emotional and behavioural problems, experience an unplanned teenage pregnancy, abuse drugs, drop out of school and engage in criminal activity (Dafoe Whitehead, 1993). Research is also cited as demonstrating that "more than 70 percent of all juveniles in state reform institutions come from fatherless homes" (Ibid., p. 77).

16 In formalist terms, classic realist narratives begin with an initial state of equilibrium which is disturbed in some way; the narrative then traces the effects of this disturbance through to its conclusion. This moment of resolution is held to defuse any threat posed by the conflict, resolve any internal ambiguities or contradictions, and restore, however superficially, the status quo (Cook, 1982). In the process of doing so, narration is held to effectively privilege a particular subjective interpretation of events.

17 Cultural feminism, for example, asserts essentialist notions of gender in order to construct women as innately more peaceful, creative and co-operative than men (see Tuttle, 1986 and Alcoff, 1988 for discussion).

18 It is interesting to note the contrast between this negative textual construction of Buchanan and a more favourable one of the Democratic Representative, Bella Abzug, in the following scene. In a conversation with Eldin, Murphy remarks that the first night at home with her new baby was "the longest night of my life. And that includes the night Bella Abzug stopped by to show me slides of her Dude Ranch vacation". This aptly demonstrates how the potential 'effectivity' of sitcom humour can be fulfilled in ways which have distinctly political implications. As discussed by Neale (1981), British Film Institute (1982) and Palmer (1987), jokes can be used to attack or affirm, ridicule or defend particular values and discourses. Here, the use of humour effectively casts the Republican Buchanan as the stuff of children's nightmares, while casting the Democrat Abzug as a somewhat boring personal associate of the star of this series. Clearly, the former constitutes a humorous assault on Buchanan, and by implication the traditional family values within which he is associated in the minds of the American public at least, and is highly suggestive of the wider political affiliations of this episode's producers.

19 A notable discrepancy exists between two different estimates of the audience share obtained by this episode: Kolbert (1992) cites Nielsen Media Research in

claiming 44 million viewers, yet so does Du Brow (1992) in offering the substantially larger figure of 70 million, or 41 percent of the audience share.

IV: The New Zealand Viewing Context

1 While early interventions did manage to stem the decline temporarily, the nation's external and internal debt burden gradually spiralled upward, and the overseas debt bill increased from five percent of GDP in March 1974 to a sizeable twenty-five percent ten years later (James, 1989). Inflation, unemployment and interest rates also rose considerably, when not being artificially suppressed by rigid controls such as the general price, rent and wage freeze in 1982 (James, 1989; Walker, 1989). Unemployment levels, for example, skyrocketed from four point six percent in November 1984 to more than ten percent by the end of 1988 (Collins, 1989). As discussed by James (1989), Walker (1989), Kelsey (1993 and 1995) and Kelsey and O'Brien (1995), the New Zealand government continued to adopt an interventionist response to the economic crisis during the late 1970s and early 1980s. As a consequence, many industries came to largely rely on tariffs, import quotas and government subsidies, creating a degree of dependency which some argued only compounded New Zealand's sluggish response to the harsh realities of a rapidly restructuring global economy.

2 Far from a 'common-sense' or inevitable response to the fiscal crisis, however, the subsequent economic reforms in fact reflected a *discursive* shift away from Keynesian economic theory, with its emphasis on the virtues of a State-led interventionist economy, toward a 'New Right' monetarist discourse which effectively reified the 'free' market as the ultimate social equaliser and constructed 'Big Government' as an impediment to individual and commercial freedom (Kelsey, 1993; Kelsey & O'Brien, 1995). In New Zealand, the package of policy initiatives and rhetoric informed by this discourse came to be labelled 'Rogernomics' in honour of its key exponent in this country, former Treasurer Roger Douglas. Similar personifications of this discourse were earlier evident in the United States and also Britain, under the respective tags of 'Reaganomics' and 'Thatcherism'.

3 These 'incentives' took the form of a reduction in the adult rate of the unemployment benefit, a new 'stand down' period of six to twenty-six weeks, and the abolition of the family benefit (Kelsey, 1993; Campbell, 1995b).

4 Maori New Zealanders experienced particularly high rates of poverty and unemployment (on top of already high levels of educational failure, incarceration, and

mental and physical disorder) during this period of economic restructuring. As Kelsey (1993) notes, at the June quarter of 1991, the Household Labour Force Survey recorded the rate of Maori unemployment as twenty-seven percent, compared with just over seven and a half percent among the European population. Slightly lower figures were recorded by the 1991 Census (Department of Statistics, 1991a). Welfare dependency was thus a fact of life for many indigenous New Zealanders, with three in four Maori women and almost three in five Maori men receiving income support during 1990 (Ibid.). It is thus not altogether surprising to find that "increasing numbers turned to the alternative economy of drugs and petty crime, or opted out through suicide" (Kelsey, 1993, p. 11).

5 It is also interesting to note that for a period of 'restructuring' designed to decrease state dependency and encourage 'self-responsibility', a total of 750,000 people (nearly forty percent of the voting age population) were in receipt of benefits intended to substitute for full-time employment by October 1988 (Walker, 1989). For further discussion of the broader social effects and implications of the economic 'restructuring', see Bunkle and Lynch (1992), Kelsey (1993 and 1995) and Kelsey and O'Brien (1995).

6 Despite this increased level of participation, women's paid work still tends to be part-time, on a casual basis, and is often interrupted during periods of childbearing and rearing. The responsibility for these activities continues to fall disproportionately on women's shoulders - women spend sixty-six percent more hours than men per week on unpaid housework and child care (Stirling, 1994). Women in the paid work force are also still significantly over-represented in their traditional occupations of nursing, teaching, shop work and cleaning, and at senior management level, earn significantly less than their male counterparts. Two decades after equal pay was enshrined in law, New Zealand women still earn on average only eighty-one percent of a male wage (Phare, 1995; see also Statistics New Zealand/Te Tari Tatau, 1993).

7 This notion of media-inspired 'moral panics' derives from the work of Stan Cohen (1973) (cited in Kelsey, 1993).

8 Paradoxically, the dangers of child care were also highlighted as the trial of two women charged with assaulting and ill-treating children at Hamilton's Mary St Kreche hit local headlines early in April 1995 (*WT*: 4.4.95 p.3; *WT*:5.4.95 p.8; *WT*:6.4.95 p.2;*WT*:7.4.95 p.2; *WT*:8.4.95 p.8; *WT*:13.4.95 p.1).

9 Some employers refused to allow pregnant women or mothers with young children to work during the 1960s, and many who did work were accused of neglecting their maternal responsibilities (Kedgley, 1996). These ideas persisted well into the 1970s, where social pressures against working mothers remained strong. Mothers who did work were viewed as selfish and as putting their children's emotional and psychological development at risk. Many consequently experienced feelings of guilt and anxiety (Ibid.).

10 In detailing just these four discourses, it is not my intention to suggest that these were the *only* accounts available to New Zealand viewers of this episode, but rather than these were the *dominant* voices in circulation within the wider cultural context of their reception in 1995.

11 Other writers have used various terms to identify this discursive position, including the 'libertarian right' (Jesson et al., 1988), 'neo-liberalism' (Dalziel, 1992), 'market-liberalism' (Middleton, 1990), and the 'new right' (Price, 1994).

12 This notion is clearly articulated in the rational ethical human position adopted by Treasury (1987), which conceives society as "made up of interdependent individuals motivated at least in part by self-interest and opportunism" (Kelsey, 1993, p. 77-8).

13 See *NZWW*:13.2.95, pp. 10-11 and *NZWW*:13.3.95, pp. 10-11.

14 John Cooney, editor of the Christian magazine *Grapevine* (*Assignment* 8.6.95).

15 As Spoonley et al. (1988) point out, there has been considerable interchange between these New Zealand groups and similar organisations in the United States, the later providing their local counterparts with useful models for highly effective lobbying.

16 Various 'pro-family' initiatives are espoused by this party, such as limiting the power of social workers, closing abortion clinics and abolishing the 'no fault' system of divorce (Campbell, 1995a).

V: Studies of Audience Reception

1 This was also found by Kitzinger (1993) in her study of public beliefs about HIV/AIDS. Kitzinger found that even though a group of gay men "related to media messages about AIDS from a perspective different to that of their heterosexual counterparts", they still produced "statements, assumptions and images that...did not accord with their preferred political position or, indeed, their own personal experiences of reality" (Kitzinger, 1993, p. 298).

2 Hobson (1980), Brunsdon (1986), and Van Zoonen (1994) offer critical insight into this difference by relating it to the different social positions ascribed to women and men within the traditional nuclear family:

> Whereas for men the home is a site of leisure, clearly marked by a temporal and spatial distance from the workplace, for women it is a place of work inhabited by husband and children who require continual emotional and material care. (Van Zoonen, 1994, p. 114)

3 Numerous studies specifically examine the gendered uses, pleasures and meanings of 'feminine' genres such as soap opera, and subsequently concern themselves exclusively with the receptions of female viewers. While this focus on women viewers and the 'feminine' forms enjoyed by them reflects an admirable attempt to give due recognition to genres which have been historically derided, it leaves substantial gaps in our knowledge of whether, and in what ways, men and women receive the same texts differently.

4 This work forms part of a larger study conducted by Livingstone and Lunt (1994).

5 Barely a handful of such studies exist. While a small number of scholars have documented the prevalence of ethnic *stereotypes* within mainstream television programmes (Gray 1986 and 1989; Herman, 1986; Cummings, 1988), few explore the links between differences in audience reception and ethnicity, and these frequently lack comparative data. Of particular note is the work of Jacqueline Bobo (1988) on black women's readings of films such as *The Colour Purple,* and Marie Gillespie's (1995) recent ethnographic study of the role of television in the formation and transformation of identity among Punjabi youth in London.

6 This multiplicity is revealed by Press (1991a), who found that divergent moral and political beliefs provided different middle-class women with alternative ways of talking about *Cagney and Lacey*'s handling of the controversial issue of abortion. While middle-class pro-choice activists were found to draw on a discourse of *justice* and its terminology (the language of rights, individual autonomy and freedom from authority), middle-class liberal Presbyterians drew on a moral discourse of *care*, leading them to evaluate alternative responses to an unwanted pregnancy in terms of the possibility of preserving relationships and considering the effects of abortion on all concerned (Press, 1991a). While it is obviously inappropriate to make broad generalisations on the basis of findings from such a small-scale study (a total of 14 participants were interviewed in four focus groups) this study does offer a very pertinent illustration of the way in which broad categories such as socioeconomic class and gender can be internally fragmented by other social group memberships, with often striking consequences.

7 They found, for example, that participants gave various *individual* responses to this programme's lesbian content, ranging from that of a born-again Christian woman who avoided watching the series when it first aired because she saw it as "holding up homosexuality as OK", to those of the two lesbian viewers, both of whom expressed pleasure at the positive portrayal of Jess as a young, sexually-active lesbian (Hallam & Marshment, 1995, p. 5). In response to questions about the relationship between the central protagonist (Jess) and her mother, however, a significant *overall* difference was found between the responses of those who were themselves mothers and those who were not. While offering useful insight into the sorts of differences that exist between women, this study is very much limited by the fact that its small sample size precludes useful sociological categorisation. To some extent however, Hallam and Marshment undermine the very real contribution offered by their work by reverting in this way to empiricist legitimating strategies *such as* quantification. For example, they note that "a third of the respondents defined *Oranges* as being about the relationship between Jess and her mother" (Ibid., p. 7), a figure which is somewhat meaningless given that only *eight* women took part in this study. In other words, in spite of their strongly ethnographic orientation, Hallam and Marshment attempt to quantify differences in the responses they obtained, and to then relate these to socially-defined identities. Not surprisingly, they find no neat correlation between the two:

> [T]here were tendencies towards certain interpretations and/or pleasures according to age, sexuality and motherhood, but not such as to amount to a 'lesbian' reading versus a 'heterosexual' one, or an 'older' reading versus a

> 'younger' one. There was certainly not a 'black' reading versus a 'white' one. (Ibid., p. 14)

Yet in making this assertion, Hallam and Marshment assume that particular participants can be regarded as representative of all 'black' or all 'lesbian' women. Even more problematically, in the absence of any 'evidence' that interpretation and response was 'structured' by factors such as ethnicity, age or sexual identity, the authors invoke and essentialise the most obvious remaining social category: *gender*: "we would say that overall the diversity remained within a recognisable 'we' of common experiences and common pleasures which seemed to owe much *to our common positions as women*" (Ibid., p. 14; emphasis added).

8 It should be noted that what constitutes 'quality' in television production has been the subject of on-going and vigorous debate since television's emergence as a cultural phenomena in the late 1940s (Corner, 1995). These debates have centred around, firstly, the aesthetic quality of television production as "an agency of popular art", and secondly, its potentially detrimental influence on accepted social and cultural standards and values (Ibid., p. 159). Often, established criteria within the fields of literature, theatre and art have been used to assess the standard and value of particular television productions. This is reflected in contemporary assessments of 'quality' programming, which are, as Blumler (1992) reveals, frequently bound up with rather abstract notions of what constitutes a 'worthwhile viewing experience'. In the realm of light entertainment programmes such as sitcoms, 'quality' is specifically indicated by challenging or controversial content and by provision for the airing of dissenting voices (British Broadcasting Research Unit, 1989). Quality comedy is defined as witty and inventive; its humour is allusive, serious, original, self-reflexive and is themed around significant 'social issues'; characters have some degree of depth; and the writing and performance is of a 'high' standard (Ibid.; Corner, 1995). Poor quality television, on the other hand, is notable primarily for its *failure* to fulfil these demanding criteria. This failure is frequently attributed to the *commercial* rather than artistic orientation of certain television producers, which is held to be expressed in an appeal "to the 'lowest common denominator' as a consequence of the need to maximise audiences" (Corner, 1995, p. 161). The economic imperative of commercial television is thus seen to result in television programming that is often described as 'safe', 'mindless', 'trivialising', 'banal', 'superficial', 'formulaic' and 'repetitive' (British Broadcasting Research Unit, 1989; Corner, 1995).

9 As Livingstone and Lunt (1994) point out, this term is frequently conflated with a conception of audience 'activity', yet there are significant differences between a

viewer's ability to dissect, analyse and reflect on the form or rhetorical content of a television programme and their ability to articulate a critical or oppositional stance in relation to that content, as Philo (1990) and Roscoe et al. (1995) contend. Hence, these two different types of audience 'activity' are distinguished in the model of reception outlined below.

10 The first realm is that of *universal experience*, which Höijer describes as those experiences "humans share by virtue of their being human beings" (Höijer, 1992, p. 586). Among such 'universal' experiences, Höijer includes childhood, ageing, health and illness, "basic human activities like upbringing and training, working, loving" and "experiences of nature: the sun, the moon, night and day, plant life and so forth" (Ibid.). Problematically, however, Höijer's assumption that humans everywhere share a similar *experience of* even the most seemingly universal phenomena is a somewhat ethnocentric one - a person's experience of the sun, for example, differs radically depending on whether they are located near the Equator or the North or South poles. Höijer's second category charts the realm of *cultural experience*, defined as "those aspects of experiences which are products of a specific society, culture or sub-culture within society", including wider social norms and representations as well as those "typical of the gender and social class to which you belong, the area you live in, the schools you attend, your occupation and so forth" (Ibid.). *Private experiences* are defined as the unique manifestation of those experiences in the cognitive schema of individuals, no two of whom are completely the same, and each of whom has "different abilities and personalities" (Ibid.). While the interior, psychological nature of these experiences raises the obvious problem of how one might access them, Höijer takes this possibility largely for granted.

VI: Cross-Cultural Encounters

1 This issue of 'quality' in television production has been discussed in relation to material presented in chapter V (see note 8 above).

2 In the following remarks, Marjory makes this comparison between *Murphy Brown* and Tom Lehrer explicit:

> [This episode] doesn't say anything worth saying except in that one little bit...it's not portraying anything important about American society, it's just supposed to be making people laugh and it's not even successful at that. But then you see I'm a Tom Lehrer fan, and half the Americans don't even appreciate

> Tom Lehrer, because he's too sophisticated for them.../.... He's actually a mathematics Professor at Harvard, but he also writes comic songs...like there's "We've got the bomb, and that was good/ 'Cause we like peace and motherhood/ Russia got the bomb, but that's OK/ Balance of power's obtained that way". And there's some about pollution, some of them are still relevant.... They're very clever...the sort of people that watch that sort of crap wouldn't understand what he was talking about. (Marjory)

VII: Motherhood', 'The Family', and *Murphy Brown*

1 While a number among this group of divergent readers appeared to have access to child-centred discourse by virtue of their location within this different cultural context, another locally-circulating discourse was notably absent from participants' accounts. While the discourse of the economic new right clearly dominated New Zealand's political and economic spheres throughout 1995, it did not feature as the primary discursive repertoire of any of the participants in this study, and was very rarely articulated. One such instance is evident in the following response offered by Paul below, which similarly constitutes a negotiated rhetorical evaluation of Murphy's status as a single mother. As Paul reframes this issue as one of single motherhood by choice, he draws on the notion of 'user pays' popularised by both the fourth Labour and succeeding National Governments, a notion that is intimately associated with the discourse of the economic new right:

> *What do you think of women who raise children on their own, like Murphy's doing in this programme?*
> I first of all think of women who are in that situation not through choice, [such as] when marriages split up, [or with] unwanted pregnancies, all those sort of things. Then there are the ones like Murphy who have had them out of choice.... *If you're making that choice [then] without trying to use the cliché of 'user-pays', which I've just gone and done, you have to support your decision.* For those women who have been dropped in it, they need a bit more consideration because they didn't make the decision. It was forced on them. And I'd probably be more lenient towards those sorts of women if they came looking for help than [I would towards] Murphy Brown, who's gone into it with her eyes open. (Paul; emphasis added)

Like several other participants, Paul assumes that Murphy is a mother by choice rather than circumstance, and similarly extends more sympathy to those women who are

'victims of misfortune' than he does to those women whose plight is 'of their own making'. In the above extract, he articulates the view that individuals must assume responsibility for the financial cost of the life decisions they make, and hence that women who choose to raise children alone should be prepared to live according to the dominant ethos of 'user-pays'. Paul's articulation of economic new right discourse is most likely related to his political affiliation as a National Party voter, his professional occupation and high income, which place him within one of the social groups that has benefited most from the various economic and social reforms informed by this discourse.

The striking absence of this locally circulating discourse in the accounts of other participants in this study may be attributable to its relatively recent emergence in this country, which may mean it has yet to establish wide circulation within the general population. Alternatively, this absence might reflect its equally rapid fall from public grace, as the negative social consequences of the economic reforms it inspired were felt among low and medium income earners. Differently again, the silence of such a publicly dominant discursive regime here in New Zealand may again indicate the extent of this episode's ability to 'set the agenda' for local viewers' receptions of it.

Appendix A: Synopsis

Murphy's Revenge - US

(You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato - NZ)

Scene 1: The office
As the opening credits roll, Murphy arrives at work wearing a smart tailored suit and looking very pleased with herself. When her colleagues see her they begin to cheer, whistle and applaud. Murphy urges them on. When Murphy's close friend and colleague Frank suggests she is getting a little carried away, Murphy reminds him that she recently nailed a Mob boss on camera in front of 30 million people. Just as she begins to encourage more applause, her boss Miles berates her for her attention-seeking behaviour, and for being late for a pitch meeting. Murphy explains that she hadn't slept well due to a very long and detailed dream in which she was pregnant, a prospect which the others clearly find unbelievable, and highly amusing. After some related comic banter, Murphy goes over to introduce herself to her new male secretary who begins to cry (literally) like a baby, leaving Murphy perplexed as to what she said to upset him. As this scene fades out, the sound of a crying baby carries over into the next scene.

Scene 2: At night, Murphy's bedroom
Murphy is woken up from her dream by her new-born baby crying and gets up to comfort him, with little success. Meanwhile, she delivers a comic soliloquy expressing her frustration and anxiety at the fact that his behaviour isn't conforming to that described in her textbooks. Unable to understand or soothe her child, Murphy finally picks up a fluffy toy duck and tries to improvise a silly little song about it in the hope of distracting him and sending him off to sleep. Unsuccessful in both endeavours, she gives up and throws the duck over her shoulder.

New Zealand commercial break

Scene 3: The next morning, Murphy's living room
Murphy walks out of her bedroom carrying the baby monitor just as her house-painter and friend Eldin enters through the front door. Eldin begins expressing his envy at Murphy's first night of 'maternal bliss', but stops short and comments on her dishevelled appearance. Murphy snaps back that the baby is finally asleep and that she will rip out his vocal cords should he wake the baby up. She then apologises in response to Eldin's hurt retort, and he assures her that she will eventually get used to the baby, but Murphy remains uncertain and bemoans her inability to understand her baby's needs. Eldin then presents her with his gift, a 'Swing 'n Snooze' for the baby, which he claims will solve the problem. A very grateful Murphy says she will consider naming the baby after Eldin if this sleeping aid works, generating a comic dialogue in which Murphy justifies her cautionary approach to choosing a name. Murphy then excuses herself in order to have a quick shower, explaining that she is expecting a prospective nanny to arrive very shortly. When Eldin says he is just going to take a peek at the baby, she loudly protests and tells him to watch the picture of a baby on the cardboard box instead. But before she can get upstairs, the door bell rings.

As she shows the first of several nanny candidates in (Mrs Jenkins), Murphy apologises for her appearance and lack of preparation. Mrs Jenkins offers to reschedule their meeting but Murphy desists, making reference to her professional capacity as a journalist who has interviewed lots of famous people. As she struggles to come up with a suitably "motherly kind of question", Eldin offers one of his own. He asks what she would do if the boy wanted to wear two different-coloured socks, generating a heated debate in which Mrs Jenkins and Eldin express opposing views on the issue of conformity versus self-expression. When Mrs Jenkins articulates an

authoritarian position, Eldin shakes his head at Murphy and pulls up his trouser legs to show that he is himself wearing one green and one red sock.

Scene 4: Same morning, Murphy's living room
Murphy is interviewing the second nanny candidate and is so impressed with the woman's qualifications that she begins telling her when she can start. Eldin immediately clears his throat and shakes his head, at which point Murphy retracts and hands over to Eldin for his next question. Once again, his question relates to parenting styles and Eldin's dissatisfaction with the candidate's response leads Murphy to show her to the door. Aside to Eldin, Murphy tests out her own choice of response and Eldin shakes his head in disbelief.

Scene 5: Later that morning, Murphy's living room
Eldin is now conducting the interviews, while Murphy assembles the 'Swing 'n Snooze'. The third nanny candidate apparently meets with Eldin's approval and is offered the job. Showing the woman to the door, Murphy apologises for putting her through the third degree and explains that she naturally had some reservations about entrusting her defenceless child to the care of a total stranger. Suddenly very aware of his fragility, she begins accusing the woman of having bizarre plans to harm her child. When the woman rushes to leave, Murphy interprets this as evidence that her suspicions were well-founded. Although Eldin suggests she may have over-reacted, Murphy appears convinced that the woman was some kind of witch. She then excuses herself to take her shower, but is again thwarted as the baby begins to cry.

New Zealand commercial break

Scene 6: Noon, the office
Frank, Miles and Murphy's two other colleagues, Jim and Corky, are having trouble deciding where to have lunch when Murphy enters the office wearing a tan trench coat and baseball cap. They immediately express their concern that she is there, instead of at home with the baby. Murphy reassures them that everything is fine, and begins to thank individual people for their gifts, but is evidently confused about who gave what. When Frank expresses his concern about her apparent disorientation, Murphy claims to be basking in her role as new mother and immediately shifts to a work-related topic, sitting down at the table and asking what they are working on. The others then assure her they can cope without her, and Miles orders her to go home. Murphy immediately breaks down and expresses her sense of being overwhelmed by her role as new mother. The others make various attempts to 'comfort' her, all of which are comically undermined by Murphy. At the sound of a beeper, Murphy indicates it is time for the baby's next feeding and resigns herself to going home.

Scene 7: That night, Murphy's living room
Murphy engages in a comic soliloquy as she tries to settle the baby in his new 'Swing 'n Snooze". He finally falls asleep, but just as Murphy lies down on the couch to rest, the doorbell rings and the baby begins to cry. Frank enters and is critical of Murphy's attempt to comfort the baby. As he shows her how to do this properly, we learn that Frank came from a large family and 'learned a few things'. Murphy is impressed as the baby stops crying, and she begins to take notes on Frank's technique. Frank tells her she needs to 'feel her way through' and hands her the baby for her to try. At first Murphy is very nervous and stiff, and then rather too rough, but as she begins talking she starts to relax and the baby falls asleep in her arms. Murphy is amazed and says that for the first time, she feels that she may be able to cope after all.

Frank settles down to watch the evening news and mind the baby so Murphy can finally take her shower. Before she can do so, both are distracted by a news report of a speech made by vice president Dan Quayle in which he cites Murphy Brown as an example of a "poverty of values". Murphy is incensed by Quayle's comments about her "glamorising single motherhood" and speaks of having agonised over her decision

to keep her child. Frank tries to reassure her by belittling Quayle and telling her no one will pay any attention, but the phone immediately starts ringing as various newspapers seek out her response to Quayle's speech. Murphy refuses to comment and tries to comfort the baby, who is now crying again, as Frank deals with the reporters.

New Zealand commercial break

Scene 8: The next day, at the office
Miles is in the lift reading the New York *Daily News*, the headline of which reads 'Quayle to Murphy Brown: You Tramp!'. He looks up from his paper wearing an incredulous expression. The song "You Make Me Wanna Shout" plays through this and the next three scenes. Miles enters the office to find everyone crowded around watching a news item on the Quayle incident, and shoos them back to work.

Scene 9: The next day, at the office
Miles is in the lift reading the *New York Post*, the headline of which reads "Dan Rips Murphy Brown". He arrives at work, walks up to Frank, Jim and Corky and they swap papers, the headlines of which are shown to read: "Quayle: Murphy No Role Model" and "Quayle Reads Riot Act To Murphy Brown". Miles continues to look incredulous.

Scene 10: The next day, at the office
Miles is in the lift reading a French newspaper with a huge headline reading "Murphy A Donne Naissance A La Scandle". He arrives at the office, ignores the work to which several staff members try drawing his attention, and places his paper on top of an ever-expanding pile. As he returns to the lift, he takes a paper off a man and throws it on the office floor.

Scene 11: The same day at Phil's Bar
Every single patron is reading a copy of the News, the headline of which reads "Murphy Has A Baby, Quayle Has A Cow". Miles is at the counter taking Mylanta for a stomach upset. He turns to look at the television just as it shows president George Bush (in the midst of a press conference with the Canadian Prime Minister) inviting *Murphy Brown* questions, and slumps over the bar in dismay.

Scene 12: That day, back at the office
Miles is fielding questions from a hoard of reporters who are crowding round him, one of whom suggests that Murphy has been officially silenced by the network, a notion that Miles convincingly refutes. As Jim enters, he too is swamped by reporters and fights them off, threatening to have them arrested. Miles explains that Murphy isn't answering his calls and has told him to handle the media circus. The local publican Phil enters with their lunch and is surrounded by reporters asking him how Murphy feels about the Quayle incident. Calling on Miles to 'do something', he expresses his concern about having to watch everything he says, and then accuses another reporter named Marv of taping their conversation in order to get a scoop. When Phil learns that Marv is in fact using the tape recorder to learn Italian in preparation for a holiday, he makes a hurried and comical exit.

Corky and Frank enter. Frank has the latest opinion poll, which indicates majority support for Murphy, and excitedly shows it to the others. Corky, however, is unimpressed, and says she was raised to believe that having a child out of wedlock was morally wrong. Jim then gives a speech about the contradictory messages being circulated within society. Miles states that the important thing is that they be ready to support Murphy, and Frank expresses his confidence that she is at that very moment plotting her revenge.

Scene 13: Same time, Murphy's bedroom
Murphy is gushing over the last piece of her baby's umbilical cord, which has just fallen off, while Eldin is more concerned about the reporters outside. Eldin soon becomes concerned about Murphy's state of mind, which he suggests has become disturbed through lack of sleep. He tries to take her over to the window, but Murphy desists and says that if he ignores the reporters, they will go away. She expresses her concern that whatever she says will be twisted to fit some other political agenda, and bemoans the fact that she isn't being left alone to get to know her son. When Eldin is critical of her suggestion that she become reclusive, Murphy responds by saying that she is just doing what a mother is supposed to do by protecting her child. Eldin reminds her that she used to be someone who tried to make the world a better place rather than shut it out, and Murphy realises that Eldin is right. She begins enacting her revenge by tipping a diaper pail over the head of a reporter under the guise of giving him a quote.

New Zealand commercial break

Scene 14: That night, the FYI news room
Miles and Murphy walk toward the news desk. Miles is informing Murphy that they can fill her spot should she need to back out, but Murphy assures him that she knows what she is doing. Frank attends to her needs while Corky warns Murphy not to think about the baby in case she stains her blouse and causes an even greater uproar. Carl, a Republican who works in the studio, pledges his support and love for Murphy and is hauled away as they go live to air. Jim introduces Murphy, who looks straight into the camera and responds to Quayle's comments by saying that his traditional definition of 'family' is exclusive and unfair. She expresses the view that families are ultimately defined by affection and commitment, and then moves over to a group of what seem to be single-parent families, whom she asks to introduce themselves.

Scene 15: Later that night, Murphy's bedroom
Murphy is woken up by the baby crying and delivers a comic soliloquy in which she follows Frank's directions while informing her son that she was a total professional that day and had 'taken the high road'. When the baby doesn't settle, she turns the radio on tries to find some Motown, but gets Barry Manilow instead. To her horror, the baby likes it. She grudgingly begins to sing and sway to 'Copacabana' and considers 'Rico' as a possible name, but immediately dismisses the idea.

Scene 16: Same time, outside an official residence
A truck pulls up to the gate. The driver gets out and opens the back doors, and a stream of potatoes tumble down onto the driveway in slow motion.

Scene 17: Next morning, Washington D.C.
Scenes of the city and White House are depicted as the voice of a radio announcer reports that a thousand pounds of potatoes were dumped in the vice president's driveway early that morning. The announcer calls for an end to all the 'potatoe' jokes and tells the vice president to be glad he didn't misspell fertiliser.

Appendix B: Programme List

Documentary/ Current Affairs/ Educational Television

ETV Portrait of a Family **3.5.95 TV1 8.05 am**
Variations on a Theme: The different types of families in society today.

World Around Us: Baby It's You **31.5.95 TV3 7.30 pm**
2) *From Taking Hold to Word of Mouth:* A look at how infants learn to use their hands and how they develop speech.

Treasures Parent Time **6.6.95 TV3 9.55 am**
Working Mothers: Hilary Muir Clark talks to parent Anne Knowles from the New Zealand Employer's Federation.

Drama

Heartbeat **12.3.95 TV1 7.35 pm**
Kate tries to help a teenager who is too afraid to tell her parents she is pregnant.

Bambino Mio **6.4.95 TV1 8.35 pm**
A drama based on a true story about the wealthy English widow of a Frenchman who has everything she wants - except a child of her own.

Montana Sunday Theatre: **28.5.95 TV1 8.40 pm**
Tears Before Bedtime
4) Sarah and David's marriage is under threat and the "nanny Mafia" and their young charges try desperately to remedy the situation.

Melrose Place **4.6.95 TV3 7.30 pm**
The Days of Wine and Vodka: Kimberly is crushed when she learns she cannot adopt; and Jo is offered a life-line for her unborn baby.

Movie

Wait Till Your Mother Gets Home! **1.4.95 TV3 4 pm**
A comedy about a football coach who bets his wife he can manage the home front for two months while she takes on a summer job.

My Life is a Lie **26.5.95 TV3 8.30 pm**
A maniacal woman kidnaps a young boy to replace her dead son. All goes well for eight years until unsettling dreams force the boy to question his identity.

Wheels of Terror **2.6.95 TV3 8.30 pm**
A solo mother driving a school bus pursues a sinister man in a black sedan who has abducted her daughter.

Science Fiction

War of the Worlds **13.3.95 TV3 11 pm**
Breeding Ground: The Morthren race move one step closer to world domination when they impregnate a human woman with an alien foetus.

Star Trek: The Next Generation **26.5.95 TV3 7.30 pm**
Inheritance: A routine mission to save the endangered planet Atrea brings Data face to

face with a woman called Juliana, who claims to be his mother.

Sitcom

Blossom **16.3.95 TV3 4.30 pm**
Thanks for the Memorex: Blossom plans a trip to an old holiday haunt to rekindle feelings of family togetherness (her mother walked out on the family several years ago).

Roseanne **16.3.95 TV2 8 pm**
Nine is Enough: The Conner house is too crowded and Dan considers giving Becky and Mark the boot, but Roseanne has news that complicates things (she's pregnant).

The Simpsons **27.3.95 TV2 6.30 pm**
Marge on the Lam: Marge has a wild night in a stolen car with a divorcee, Ruth Powers (Ruth is also a single mother).

Laurie Hill **8.5.95 TV3 2 pm**
A comedy series about a frazzled family doctor who is trying to be the perfect career woman, a loving wife and a caring mother to her five-year-old son.

Grace Under Fire **25.5.95 TV2 7.30 pm**
Hello, I'm Your Mother: Grace is contacted by the son she had as a teenager and gave up for adoption.

Friends **14.6.95 TV2 8 pm**
The One With Two Parts: Ross asks his dad for advice on being a dad.

Soap Opera

Neighbours **8.3.95 TV2 5.30 pm**
Ramsay Street is full of baby talk and Hannah's hopes are dashed.

Shortland Street **3.4.95 TV2 7 pm**
Waverly fears that Carmen is a few sandwiches short of a picnic (Carmen has decided to have a tubal ligation as she does not want to have children).

Talk Show

Ricki Lake **21.3.95 TV2 2 pm**
Today I Tell My Parents - I Want To Divorce You.

Sally Jessy Raphael **28.3.95 TV3 1 pm**
I Kicked My Child Out: Sally Jessy Raphael meets parents who have reached breaking point with their errant children and want to disown them altogether.

The Oprah Winfrey Show **11.4.95 TV3 5 pm**
I Abandoned My Baby and I Want It Back: Oprah Winfrey meets two women who abandoned their babies shortly after birth, but now want them back.

The Susan Powter Show **24.4.95 TV2 11.30 am**
Childbirth Made Easier.

Ricki Lake **1.5.95 TV2 2 pm**
I'm Pregnant and My Man is Beating Me.

The Oprah Winfrey Show **10.5.95 TV3 5 pm**
Marcia Clark on Trial as a Mother: Oprah Winfrey meets the lead prosecutor in the O.J.

Simpson trial. She stands to lose her children because of her demanding job and is at the centre of a controversy over whether working women are good mothers.

Sally Jessy Raphael **12.5.95 TV3 1 pm**
Mom Forced Me to Give Up My Baby: Sally Jessy Raphael meets women whose mothers forced them to have their babies adopted out.

The Susan Powter Show **25.5.95 TV2 11.30 am**
Men and Women Face Off - The Battle of the Sexes.

Ricki Lake **31.5.95 TV2 2 pm**
You're Used Goods...I'll Only Marry A Virgin.

The Oprah Winfrey Show **12.6.95 TV3 5 pm**
Hillary Clinton: Oprah Winfrey talks with US First Lady Hillary Clinton about parenting and the importance of spending time with kids.

Appendix C: Introductory Letter

Dear .....

I am writing to you in the hope that you would be so kind as to assist me in the following matter. For my Ph.D. research, I hope to interview a diverse range of people about their interpretation of a particular television programme. The purpose of this research is to gain insight into why different people often interpret the same programme in very different ways. Why do some people love the same programme that others 'love to hate'? Why do some people find a programme entertaining and enjoyable, while others find it offensive? What are such differences based on? In order for my findings to be as complete as possible, I would like to include people from all walks of life and with a range of political and religious perspectives. This is where I believe you may be able to help me. I am looking for adult men and women who would be generous enough to spend a few hours of their time participating in this research project. Do you know of any members of your organisation who might be interested in doing so? Would it be possible for you to raise this matter at your next meeting?

Please explain to those who express an interest that their participation would involve spending 5-10 minutes completing a confidential questionnaire with details about their personal background (such as age, occupation, religion and viewing practices) followed at a later date by a private viewing and interview session of 2-3 hours in duration. Also, please reassure them that the programme they will be asked to watch does not contain any violence, nudity or coarse language. If any members of your organisation do express an interest in participating in this research, or simply wish to know more about it before deciding, please ask them to complete a reply slip and return these to me together in the envelope supplied.

Yours sincerely

Carolyn Michelle

Appendix D: Consent Form

RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET

Researcher: Carolyn Michelle
Ph: 856-2889 x 8076 (wk)
Supervisor: Dr Jane Roscoe, Department of Film and Television Studies
Ph: 856-2889 x 6145 (wk)

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

For my Ph.D. research project, I hope to interview people about their interpretations of a television programme. The purpose of this research is to gain an understanding of the various ways in which people interpret television programmes and the things which influence these interpretations. I'm interested in finding out whether different people interpret the same programme in different ways and if so, why?

WHAT WOULD YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THIS RESEARCH ACTUALLY INVOLVE?

Since I am interested in the reasons why different people might interpret the same television programme in different ways, your participation in the first stage of this project would involve filling out a questionnaire with details about your personal background such as your age, occupation, and viewing practices. This information will be used to select participants for the second stage of this research - a viewing and interview session which should last between 2-3 hours.

Due to the fact that I need to include a wide range of different people in my research, not everyone who fills in a questionnaire will go on to participate in the second stage of this project, for which I apologise in advance. If you were **not** selected, your questionnaire would be returned to you or destroyed at your request. If you **were** selected, we would then arrange a time and venue that suits you and is private for this viewing and interview session. During this session, I would ask you about your interpretation of the programme and your feelings about the issues it raises. This interview would be recorded on audio-tape, and I might also need to take some written notes.

Some of the questions in the questionnaire and during the interview might seem quite personal. If you felt uncomfortable about answering any question, you would be free to say that you would rather not reply. You could also discontinue the interview at any time and the tape could be erased if you wished. Also, please rest assured that whatever you said would be strictly confidential and no one other than me and my supervisor would have access to your tape, which I would keep in a locked room at the University. Your privacy would be further protected through the use of a false name in all future publications and presentations relating to this research. At the completion of this research, a copy of any extracts which refer to you or your interpretation of the programme could be sent to you prior to their publication. Your tape could also be returned to you if you wished at this point.

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED, WHAT SHOULD YOU DO NEXT?

You will need to sign the attached Consent Form. Before you do so, it is important that you know exactly what your participation in this research means and involves. If you are unsure about any part of this research or your involvement in it, please feel free to talk to me or to discuss it with friends, partners or colleagues before signing. Signing this form does not mean that you are obligated to participate in my research. Feel free to change your mind at any time, but please let me know if you do so.

CONSENT FORM

I freely agree to participate in this research project, to be conducted by Carolyn Michelle of the Department of Film and Television Studies and the Department of Women's and Gender Studies, University of Waikato. The purpose of this project has been explained to me.

I understand that my participation in the first stage of this project will involve filling out a questionnaire with details about my personal background. I understand that Carolyn will use this information to select participants for the second stage of this research, and that if I am **not** selected, my questionnaire will be returned to me or destroyed at my request.

If I **am** selected, I will then be asked to participate in a viewing and interview session which could take up to 3 hours to complete. I understand that Carolyn may take some written notes during this session and that my interview will be recorded on audio-tape. I understand that she will keep all notes, records and tapes relating to my participation in this research strictly confidential and in a secure place.

I understand that the responses I give will be used by Carolyn as partial fulfilment of her doctoral degree at the University of Waikato. This information may also be used in articles and papers written by her for publication or presentation. I understand that my privacy and confidentiality will be protected through the use of a false name in her doctoral thesis and any other publications relating to this research.

I also understand that I have the following rights with regard to my participation in this research:

1) I have the right to not answer any questions that I feel uncomfortable about.

2) I have the right to receive a copy of any extracts which refer to me or my interpretation of the programme prior to their publication. I may also request that all tapes of my interview be returned to me at the completion of this research.

3) Even though I have signed this form, I may change my mind about participating in this project at any time and for any reason, and upon doing so may request that any records relating to my participation in this research be returned to me or destroyed.

4) If I am unhappy about any aspect of Carolyn Michelle's conduct during this research, I have the right to lodge a formal or informal complaint with her Supervisor, Dr Jane Roscoe.

Full name: _____

Signature of participant: _____

Signature of researcher: _____

Date: _____/_____/95

Appendix E: Background Questionnaire

CONFIDENTIAL

Background Questionnaire

Name: _____

Address: _____

Pseudonym: _____

Contact phone numbers: _____(hm)

_____(wk)

1) What sex are you?

Male ..... ☐

Female..... ☐

2) What age are you?

Under 15..... ☐

15-24 ..... ☐

25-34 ..... ☐

35-44 ..... ☐

45-54 ..... ☐

55-64 ..... ☐

65-74 ..... ☐

75 or over .... ☐

3) To which ethnic group do you feel you belong? Please tick the box or boxes that apply to you:

New Zealand European / Pakeha ..... ☐

New Zealand Maori ..... ☐

Samoan..... ☐

British..... ☐

Australian ..... ☐

Dutch..... ☐

Chinese..... ☐

Other (such as Indian, Fijian, Japanese) ☐

Please state _____

4) **Are you involved in any social, political or community groups relating to your ethnic identity?**

No..... ☐
Yes ..... ☐ Please state _____

_____

5) **What is your present relationship status?**

Single / never married..... ☐
In a de facto / couple relationship..... ☐
Married for the first time..... ☐
Remarried..... ☐
Divorced..... ☐
Separated from legal husband or wife .. ☐
Widowed..... ☐

6) **Who usually lives in the same home as you?** Please include children and babies, and tick all the boxes which apply to you:

My mother..... ☐
My father..... ☐
My legal guardian ..... ☐
My husband / wife ..... ☐
My partner (such as de-facto spouse, girlfriend) ..... ☐
My sons / daughters ..... ☐
My spouse's / partner's child(ren) ..... ☐
My brothers / sisters..... ☐
Other related persons (such as grandchildren, cousins)..... ☐
My flatmates/friends..... ☐
No one, I live alone..... ☐

7) **Do you have any children under the age of 15?**

No..... ☐ Please go to question 8
Yes ..... ☐ Please complete sections i) and ii) below

i) **What are their ages?**

Please state: _____ yrs _____ yrs _____ yrs _____ yrs

ii) **Do all of these children presently live with you?**

No..... ☐
Yes ..... ☐

8) **As a child, who usually lived in your home with you?** Please tick all the boxes which apply to you:

- My mother ☐
- My father ☐
- My step-mother/father ☐
- My legal guardian(s) ☐
- My brothers/sisters ☐
- My half-brothers/sisters ☐
- Other relatives (such as grandparents) ☐
- Other unrelated persons ☐
- I lived in foster care ☐

9) **What is your highest school qualification?**

- Left school before gaining qualifications ☐
- School Certificate in 1 or more subjects ☐
- Sixth Form Certificate in 1 or more subjects ☐
- University Entrance in 1 or more subjects ☐
- Higher School Certificate or Leaving Certificate ☐
- University Bursary or Scholarship ☐
- NZ Qualification prior to School Certificate (such as Proficiency) ☐
- Overseas school qualification (such as 'O' Levels) ☐

10) **What educational or job qualifications have you obtained since leaving school?** Please tick all the boxes which apply to you:

- None ☐
- Still at school ☐
- Trade Certificate / Advanced Trade Certificate ☐
- Polytechnic Certificate or Diploma ☐
- Nursing Certificate, Diploma or Degree ☐
- Teacher's Certificate or Diploma ☐
- Bachelors/Honours Degree ☐
- Postgraduate Degree, Certificate or Diploma ☐
- Other (such as overseas qualification) ☐

Please state _____

11) **What is your current main occupation?**

Please state _____

If retired, unemployed, or a student please go to question 14

12) What are your main tasks and responsibilities?

Please state _____

_____

_____

13) Is this work full or part time?

Full time..... ☐

Part time..... ☐

14) What would be your approximate income, before tax, for the year ending 31 March 1995? Include income derived from all sources, such as:

Wages, salaries, commission
Business or farming income (less expenses)
Income Support or other benefits
Accident Compensation
Interest, dividends, rent
Superannuation
Scholarships, awards, inheritances

Nil income or loss ..... ☐

Less than $10,000 (less than $192 per week) ..... ☐

$10,001 to $20,000 (more than $192 but less than $385 per week) ..... ☐

$20,001 to $30,000 (more than $385 but less than $577 per week) ..... ☐

$30,001 to $40,000 (more than $577 but less than $769 per week) ..... ☐

$40,001 to $50,000 (more than $769 but less than $962 per week) ..... ☐

$50,001 to $70,000 (more than $962, less than $1,346 per week) ..... ☐

$70,001 or more (more than $1,346 per week)..... ☐

15) Are you the sole income earner in your household?

No..... ☐

Yes ..... ☐ Please go to question 18

16) In your household, who earns the highest income?

Myself ..... ☐ Please go to question 17

Someone else . ☐ Please complete sections i) and ii) below

i) What is their sex?

Male ..... ☐

Female..... ☐

16) Continued...

ii) What is their occupation?

Please state _____

17) What would be your household's approximate income,, before tax, for the year ending 31 March 1995? Please include income from all sources, as above.

Nil income or loss ☐
Under $20,000 (less than $385 per week) ☐
$20,001 to $40,000 (more than $385 but less than $769 per week) ☐
$40,001 to $60,000 (more than $769 but less than $1,154 per week) ☐
$60,001 to $80,000 (more than $1,154 but less than $1,538 per week) ☐
$80,001 to $100,000 (more than $1,538 but less than $1,923 per week) ☐
More than $100,001 (more than $1,923 per week) ☐

18) Which political party did you vote for at the last general election?

National ☐
Labour ☐
New Zealand First ☐
Christian Heritage ☐
Mana Motuhake ☐
New Labour ☐
New Zealand Party ☐
Social Credit ☐
Didn't vote ☐
Other ☐ Please state _____

19) If a general election were to be held tomorrow, which party would you vote for?

National ☐
Labour ☐
Alliance ☐
Christian Heritage ☐
ACT New Zealand ☐
New Zealand First ☐
Don't know ☐
Other ☐ Please state _____

20) Are you a registered member of this political party?

No..... ☐ Please go to question 22

Yes ..... ☐

21) As a registered member, which of the following best represents your level of involvement in the party organisation?

Financial member only ..... ☐

Sometimes attend meetings..... ☐

Often involved in local branch activities ..... ☐

Involved in the day-to-day running of the branch ..... ☐

Committee or Executive member ..... ☐

Elected Party Representative / official spokesperson ... ☐

22) Are you currently a member of any other political lobby groups or organisations? For example Grey Power, SPUC.

No..... ☐ Please go to question 24

Yes ..... ☐ Please state _____

If you are involved in more than one political lobby group or organisation, please state the name of the group in which you are *most* involved:

_____

23) Which of the following best represents your level of involvement in this group or organisation?

Financial member / contribute to fund-raising campaigns ..... ☐

Sometimes involved in activities such as letter writing, picketing. ☐

Involved in organising campaigns and demonstrations..... ☐

Involved in the day-to-day running of the organisation..... ☐

Committee or Executive member ..... ☐

Elected representative / official spokesperson..... ☐

24) What, if any, is your religion?

Anglican..... ☐

Presbyterian..... ☐

Catholic..... ☐

Methodist ..... ☐

Baptist..... ☐

Latter Day Saints/Mormon ..... ☐

No religion ..... ☐ Please go to question 27

Other (such as Jewish, Hindu) ..... ☐ Please state _____

25) **How important to you are your religious beliefs?** Please circle the number on the scale below which best indicates the importance to you of your religious beliefs:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not at all important									Extremely important

26) **How often are you involved in religious activities, such as prayer meetings, services, or religious festivals?**

Several times per week ..... ☐
Once a week ..... ☐
A few times per month..... ☐
Less than once a month..... ☐
A few times each year..... ☐

27) **Are you currently involved in any community, social, or religious groups or organisations ?** For example Rotary, Zonta, Plunket, Rape Crisis, Home League

No..... ☐ Please go to question 28
Yes..... ☐ Please state _____

28) **Over the last month, approximately how many hours of television did you watch, on average, each day?**

None - I never watch television... ☐ Please go to question 31
Less than 1 hour per day ..... ☐
1-3 hours per day ..... ☐
3-5 hours per day ..... ☐
5-7 hours per day ..... ☐
More than 7 hours per day ..... ☐

29) **What types of television programme did you usually watch during this period?**

Please tick all the boxes which apply to you:

Cartoons ..... ☐
Comedies / Sitcoms ..... ☐
Cooking Programmes ..... ☐
Documentaries ..... ☐
Dramas ..... ☐
Game Shows ..... ☐

Movies..... ☐
Music Programmes..... ☐
News / Current Affairs..... ☐
Soap Operas..... ☐
Sports..... ☐
Talk Shows (e.g. Oprah).. ☐

30) **Over the last month, which television channels did you watch most often?**

Please **rank** the following television channels in order of how often you watched them, starting with 1 for the channel you watched most often. Use as many numbers as you need, but rank only those channels that you actually watched over the last month.

TV1 ..... ☐
TV2..... ☐
TV3 ..... ☐
Sky CNN International ..... ☐
Sky Sport..... ☐
Sky HBO..... ☐
Sky Orange..... ☐
Sky Discovery / Trackside... ☐
Coast To Coast..... ☐

31) **Which magazines or newspapers do you read on a regular basis?**

New Zealand Herald..... ☐
Waikato Times..... ☐
New Zealand Listener..... ☐
New Zealand Women's Weekly..... ☐
The TV Guide..... ☐
New Zealand Woman's Day..... ☐
More Magazine..... ☐
North and South / Metro..... ☐
National Business Review..... ☐
Time Magazine..... ☐
Other (such as religious magazines)..... ☐

Please state _____

32) **Over the last month, what was your main source of information about current social issues?** Please tick only one box

TV news / current affairs programmes ..... ☐
Newspapers ..... ☐
Radio ..... ☐
Magazines ..... ☐
Other people such as colleagues, friends .... ☐
Other ..... ☐

Please state _____

Thank you for your time and co-operation in completing this questionnaire. Please rest assured that the information you have given here will be kept strictly confidential and in a secure location. I will contact you shortly to let you know if you have been selected for the second stage of this research project.

Appendix F: Summary Table

SEX/AGE	ETHNICITY	OCCUPATION	INCOME	EDUCATION	POLITICAL ORIENTATION	FAMILY STATUS	RELIGION	OTHER INFORMATION
Female 23	Maori	Law Student	Low	Bachelors degree		Lives with boyfriend		
Male 22	Maori	Computer Operator	Low	Secondary	National	Lives with girlfriend		Raised by grandparents
Female 52	Pakeha	Polytech Student	Middle	Primary	Christian Heritage	Married with children	Evangelical Christian	Voluntary worker for feminist organisation
Female 27	Pakeha	Home executive	Middle	Polytech	Christian Coalition	Married, expecting first child	Pentecostal Christian	Pro-life activist
Male 24	Pakeha	Orchard worker	Low	Polytech/Trade	Christian Heritage	Single	Catholic	Pro-life activist
Male 74	Pakeha	Retired government insurance clerk	Middle	Bachelors degree	Labour	Married with children	Methodist	Raised by aunt
Female 43	Pakeha	Voluntary worker for child-care agency	Low	Polytech		Solo mother - divorced	Catholic	
Male 34	Pakeha	Self-employed Builder	Middle	Primary	New Zealand First	Married with children		Raised by grandparents
Female 78	Pakeha/Irish	Voluntary worker	Low	Secondary	Labour	Married with children	Catholic	Active trade unionist Pro-life activist
Female 48	Pakeha	Self-employed	Middle	Polytech	Labour	Married with children	Baptist	
Male 38	Pakeha/ American	University student	Low	Bachelors degree		Separated		

SEX/AGE	ETHNICITY	OCCUPATION	INCOME	EDUCATION	POLITICAL ORIENTATION	FAMILY STATUS	RELIGION	OTHER INFORMATION
Female 42	Pakeha	Investigating Officer	Middle	Polytech	Labour	Solo mother	Catholic	Active unionist
Female 23	Maori	Crèche supervisor/ secretary	Low	TTC/ Bachelors degree	Labour	Lives with sister and her children		
Female 46	Pakeha/Irish	Graduate student	Low	Bachelors degree	Labour	Separated with children		Active unionist Involved in women's organisations
Female 58	Pakeha	Senior librarian	High	Polytech		Never married, no children		
Male 34	Pakeha	House husband	Middle	Bachelors degree	Labour	Married with children		
Female 60	Pakeha	Home executive/ second-hand dealer/ landlady	Middle	Primary	National	Married with children	Catholic	Voluntary social work experience Pro-life activist
Male 55	Pakeha	Dairy farmer	High	Trade/ Postgraduate Diploma	Alliance	Married with natural and foster children	Formerly Open Brethren	Liberal-theological education
Male 36	Pakeha	Engineer	High	Bachelors degree	National	Single, no children		
Male 23	Maori/Pakeha	Bar Duty Manager	Low	Secondary/ Trade		Lives with girlfriend		Raised by aunt
Female 36	Dutch/ Pakeha	Part-time laboratory technologist	Middle	Polytech		Married with children	Christian	Mother was widowed Pro-life activist
Male 68	Dutch	Retired laboratory manager	Middle	Tertiary/Trade		Married with children	Roman Catholic	Pro-life activist

Appendix G: Interview Schedule

Viewing Context

Have you seen *Murphy Brown* before?
Who do you usually watch it with?
What do they think of this series, on the whole?
How do you feel about it?
Had you seen this particular episode before?
What bits did you remember having seen before?
What sort of people would be likely to watch this show, do you think?

Narrative Structure And Content

Pretend that I haven't seen this episode and you're filling me in on it. Explain what it was about - what happened in it?
Can you tell me how it starts off?
How does it end?
What parts stick in your mind?
Why those parts?

Narrative Point-Of-View

Is this episode trying to tell you anything, do you think?
What message do you think the programme makers are trying to get across?
Do you agree with that message?
Is this episode told from any particular character's point-of-view?
Whose story is it?
Do you think this episode pokes fun at anyone in particular, or any point-of-view?
Whose?
Are there any points-of-view that you feel aren't represented in this episode?
What points-of-view are those?

Characters

Who is the star of this series?
Tell me about Murphy. What sort of person is she?
What sort of woman is she?
Why is she the way she is?
How do you feel about her?
Can you identify with her?
Can you identify with her problems at all?
What do you think of Eldin?
What sort of person is he, do you think?
Can you identify with any of the other characters in this episode?
What is it about them that you identify with?

Mothering

Why do you think Murphy has such a hard time coping with her baby?
What sort of mother do you think she will make?
What do you think this programme says about motherhood?
What do you think about this maternal instinct idea?
Is mothering something that comes naturally to women, do you think?
Can men be 'mothers' too?
What is a 'good' mother, in your view?

Do you think women can be successful in their careers and still be 'good' mothers?

Family Values

Who is Dan Quayle?
What sort of person is he?
How do you feel about the things he said about Murphy?
Do you think he really said those things about Murphy, or did the programme makers make it up?
What does this show seem to be saying about Dan Quayle and people who share his views?
Do you think his views get a fair hearing?
How would you define 'a family'?
How do you think Dan Quayle would define 'a family'?
How do you feel about Murphy's views on 'the family'?
What are good 'family values', in your opinion?
Does this episode favour one particular definition?
Whose?

Single Motherhood

What do you think of women who raise children on their own?
Does it make a difference if women aren't as well-off as Murphy? Why?
How important are fathers?
What is their role in the family?
Do you think children need to have a father around while they are growing up?
What do you think about mothers who have young children and work at the same time?
Do you think childcare has any effects on young children?
What effects do you think it has on them?
Are those effects good or bad, in your view?
What do you think about the idea that women need to have children in order to feel fulfilled?
What about men, do men need to have children to feel fulfilled?
Who do you think should take the main responsibility for looking after young children?

Cultural References

Who is Pat Buchanan?
What sort of views does he have?
Who is L.B.J.?
What is Mylanta?
What's a nutty-buddy?
What do you make of the reference at the end to 'potatoe jokes' - can you tell me what that was about?
To what extent do you think this episode is made for an American audience?
Do you think you would interpret this episode any differently if you were and American yourself?
In what ways?
Do you think that new mothers in New Zealand are likely to experience the same problems as Murphy did in getting used to being a mother?

Finishing Off

What is the most important issue that this episode deals with, in your opinion?
Why is that issue important to you?
Has this episode influenced the way you think about motherhood at all?
Has it influenced the way you think about family values?

Appendix H: Primary Modes Of Reception, Relevant Social Group Memberships (SGMS) And Main Discursive Repertoires*

NAME	MODE(S) OF RECEPTION	RELEVANT SGMS	MAIN DISCURSIVE REPERTOIRES
Greg	Transparent/Referential	Parent	Liberal-Humanism vs. Child-Centred
Elizabeth	Referential	Solo mother, Polytech Student	Liberal-Humanism
Julie	Referential	Solo mother	Liberal-Humanism
Barbara	Referential	Parent, Polytech student	Liberal-Humanism vs. Child-Centred
Don	Referential	Parent, elderly, Methodist	Liberal-Humanism vs. Child-Centred/ Moral Right
Kimi	Transparent/Referential/Mediated	Childcare worker, tertiary educated	Liberal-Humanism vs. Child-Centred
Andrew	Transparent/Referential/Rhetorical - *Analytical*		Liberal-Humanism/ Child-Centred
John	Mediated	Parent, tertiary educated, American immigrant	Liberal-Humanism/ Child-Centred
Marjory	Mediated	Librarian, tertiary educated	Liberal-Humanism vs. Child-Centred
Yuan	Mediated	Dutch immigrant, tertiary educated	**
Paul	Transparent/ Mediated/ Rhetorical - *Analytical*	Tertiary educated***	Liberal-Humanism vs. Child-Centred
Irene	Referential/ Rhetorical - *Analytical*	Parent, working mother, elderly, left-wing, pro-life	Liberal-Humanism/ Child-Centred
Maeve	Referential/ Rhetorical -*Analytical*	Solo mother, left-wing, tertiary educated	Liberal-Humanism
Matthew	Referential/ Rhetorical - *Analytical*	Parent, left-wing, tertiary educated	Liberal-Humanism/ Child-Centred
Alison	Rhetorical - *Analytical* *Evaluative (Preferred)*	Law student	Liberal-Humanism
Robyn	Transparent/ Rhetorical - *Analytical* *Evaluative (Preferred)*		Liberal-Humanism
Jill	Referential/ Rhetorical - *Evaluative (Negotiated)*	Parent, Baptist	Liberal-Humanism vs. Child-Centred/ Moral Right
David	Rhetorical - *Evaluative (Negotiated)*	Catholic, pro-life activist	Liberal-Humanism vs. Child-Centred/ Moral Right
Melanie	Referential/ Rhetorical - *Analytical* *Evaluative (Oppositional)*	Social worker, Catholic, parent, pro-life activist	Liberal-Humanism vs. Child-Centred/ Moral Right
Sue	Mediated/ Rhetorical - *Analytical* *Evaluative (Oppositional)*	Christian, parent, laboratory technician, pro-life activist	Child-Centred/ Moral Right
Courtney	Rhetorical - *Analytical* *Evaluative (Oppositional)*	Pentecostal Christian, pro-life activist, expectant mother	Child-Centred/ Moral Right

* Unfortunately, only the second half of Michael's interview was successfully recorded; hence it was not possible to assess his primary modes of reception and relevant social group memberships.

** Yuan's reception of this American sitcom text was mediated to such a degree that it effectively precluded any form of engagement with the content of this episode. Hence it was not possible to identify his main discursive repertoires for my purposes here.

*** The key factor in framing Paul's reading appears to have been his 1992 posting in California, which coincided with Quayle's speech and the ensuing media debate. Paul was thus privy to 'insider' knowledge of the context of this episode's production, and drew on this knowledge in adopting an analytical rhetorical mode of reading.

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